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Designers wrestle with wildlife crossing

VAIL – Trucks, cars and pickups towing boats on Interstate 70 pushed up Vail Pass steadily on Saturday afternoon. Many drivers doubtlessly squinted at the roadside and wondered at the collection of people wearing hard hats.

Few could have guessed. Most fundamentally, those workers were intent on figuring out ways to get wildlife across highways more safely – and cheaply.

Teams of landscape architects from three countries and two continents had gathered at the “problem” site, 2 miles from the summit of the pass. It was the site of the first Canada lynx roadkill since the Colorado reintroduction began in 1999. Cougar, moose and bear have also inadvertently testified to the crossings by tripping camera shutters. While I-70 is Colorado's major east-west highway, the Gore Range seems to be a major north-south route for wildlife.

Keeping hooves and hoods apart has long vexed both wildlife biologists and highway engineers. While many things have been tried, only the combination of highway overpasses and underpasses such as are found in Canada's Banff National Park have clearly worked.

Some species use the underpasses readily, but other species – especially Canada lynx, grizzly bears, and moose – seem to dislike them. For them to cross busy four-lane highways, overpasses work better.

In the West, the first overpasses were built in Banff. Some 100 to 125 collisions with elk were occurring annually during the early 1980s. Officials from Parks Canada feared eventual human fatalities as well as the more predictable death of elk.

The fear was no idle one. Wildlife biologists in the mid-1990s estimated 210 annual human fatalities in the United States from auto-animal encounters, plus 29,000 human injuries, and more than \$1 billion in property damage

The overpasses spanning the four-laned TransCanada Highway in Banff National Park certainly are impressive. Large and sturdy enough to accommodate 18-wheeled trucks, they are covered by vegetation and dirt.

But they are also very expensive. The most recent ones being built in Banff cost \$12 million. Tony Clevenger, a researcher with the Western Transportation Institute, says he believes highway engineers began sharing blueprints – without rethinking the designs. As a result, there have been very few others: one each in Nevada, Utah and British Columbia, with another now under construction in Montana.

With that in mind, a consortium of interests sponsored the ARC: International Wildlife Crossing Infrastructure Design Competition. Announced last winter, it drew 36 applications from seven countries. The five finalists included two applicants from New York City, one from Philadelphia, with the final two from Toronto and Amsterdam.

These five finalists will have until early November to submit designs for review by a jury headed by Charles Waldheim, chair of landscape architecture at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. The sponsors hope the competition yields new materials, methods and insights – and not just at Vail.

Highway rattles rural image in Jackson

JACKSON HOLE, Wyo. – Although it's two hours from the closest interstate highway, Jackson Hole may be getting five lanes of its own. And some locals seem none too happy about it.

State and federal highway officials want to widen a 2-lane highway for about 6 miles south of Jackson. They say the highway widening must be done to make it safer, and anything short of five lanes won't be enough to accommodate



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growth during the next 25 years.

The Jackson Hole News & Guide reports considerable heartburn. Teton County officials, for example, had proposed a more limited widening. Hank Phibbs, a county commissioner, said the local proposal was "more sensitive of the landscape, more acceptable to our community, and perfectly safe as a highway."

Local environmentalists worry about creating an even greater barrier to wildlife. State and federal officials insist that won't be the case, as there may be some wildlife underpasses.

But finally, the highway jars Jackson Hole's self-image.

"We consider ourselves a rural community," said Louis Lasley, public lands director for the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance. "Even though they call it a rural five lane, I have a hard time imagining five lanes in the same context."

Vail and resort at odds over parking

VAIL – Many visitors to ski towns see a homogeneity in the local population, but the reality is often very different. This is particularly true of the local towns and the ski area operator.

In Vail, one former town manager likened the relationship to two convicts handcuffed together and let loose in a jungle. They have to come to terms with one another, but it's never particularly easy.

This has been evident for the last decade in Vail's parking situation. For several reasons, the existing parking garages – although large – have been inadequate during ski season, particularly weekends, holidays and powder days. Cars spill over onto frontage roads, creating what for some is an aesthetic issue and for others a safety concern.

Then comes real estate. Vail Resorts has a \$1 billion project, called Ever Vail, now before the town. It will include a lot of parking. But enough?

The Vail Daily, in a recent dispatch, describes what sounds like a new round of shoving between the town and ski co. Andy Daly, a former executive of the ski and development company who now sits on the Town Council, says providing enough parking to prevent the frontage-road problem has become the town's top priority. He's adamant the solution must be delivered by 2012 – the 50th anniversary of the ski area.

Asked about the tension, Vail Mayor Dick Cleveland said the competition and tension is natural, even healthy. The town government answers to taxpayers, while the company answers to stockholders, he said.

Hot voltage deterring problem bears

LAKE TAHOE, Calif. – Bears broke into the vacation home of John Cunningham four times in two years. Fed up, he began looking for ways to deter the bears at his cabin on the shore of Lake Tahoe.

Although now \$400 to \$600 poorer, Cunningham believes he has hit on the way to keep bears from pillaging in his pantry. He had wires electrified with 9,500 volts strung across his doors and windows, explains the Sierra Sun.

Doug McNair, who has a business specializing in installing bear-deterrent systems, said he has installed 17 such electrical systems so far, with complete success. "We've had zero bear break-ins with the wiring systems," he said.

The voltage will not kill birds and squirrels, because the wire is not grounded. Small children who touch the wires will get a jolt they'll likely not forget, but the charge shouldn't be enough to cause injury.

Bears likewise aren't likely to forget the jolt, which is why the contractor believes neighborhoods in which such electric wires protect doors and windows will train bears to avoid homes altogether.

Beetle kill takes out prized horses

GRANBY – Google Earth reveals a mass of red forests in Grand County, the epicenter of the bark beetle epidemic that is well on its way to killing 90 percent of the lodgepole pine in Colorado. Those dead trees have now started toppling in the wind – and recently killed two prized horses being boarded northwest of Granby.

The Sky Hi Daily News explains reports that the first horse, a 12-year-old thoroughbred called Sugarloaf, was a "good mountain horse," according to owner Kyle Korth. "You could hobble her, pack her, rider her, hunt off of her – she was a good horse."

The second horse, a 2-year-old Arabian filly, was a hoped-for retirement investment. Keeley Waters, an artist and bartender, explained that it took two years of artificial insemination, aided by the expertise of a top Arabian horse

breeder, to get the filly.

– Allen Best



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