

SUMMER 2021
NEWSLETTER



Happy Summer 2021, everyone!

THE INDEPENDENCE PASS FOUNDATION IS THRILLED TO BE WELCOMING IN THE NEW SEASON AND LOOKING FORWARD TO A BUSY SUMMER.

Three of our more prominent summer projects that you're likely to notice include:

- 1 installation of a new restroom at the popular Lost Man/Linkins Lake Trailhead;
- 2 restoration of a beautiful site on Green Mountain that until recently was privately owned, which will now forever be protected and accessible to the public as part of the Collegiate Peaks Wilderness; and
- 3 installation of two signs along the Lincoln Creek corridor that will inform visitors on travel conditions, where and where not to camp, and existing fire regulations.

We will also be looking for signs of successful revegetation along the Top Cut, where we worked extensively last fall to stabilize and re-green the steep slopes in conjunction with CDOT's rockfall mitigation work.

2020 demonstrated the public's appetite for more time spent outdoors, and the corresponding need for increased public lands stewardship. Toward that end, the Independence Pass Foundation will be hosting the most volunteer projects, public outings, and citizen science trainings in our 32-year history (listed in this newsletter).


We have also created a "Field Guide to the Birds of Independence Pass," for sale at ACES and the Ute Mountaineer and through IPF as part of our "Bird & Wildflower Walk" series. In addition, see our up-to-the-minute checklist of wildflowers as they bloom on the Pass, with fun facts and ID information, on our website at independencepass.org/2021-wildflower-checklist.

As we enter yet another year of below-average snowpack and continuing drought, we are

endeavoring to help educate the public as to the very real risks of fire on Independence Pass, even above treeline, as the Cameron Peak and East Troublesome fires of 2020 demonstrated. We hope you will find this newsletter's article on fire informative.

Finally, we are saddened to say goodbye to our long-time board members Paul D'Amato and David Hyman, who served terms as Treasurer and President, respectively, with grace, dedication, and humor. Huge thanks, Paul and David!

We are thrilled, however, to introduce four new board members—Emily Maynard, Brandon Cooper, Adam McCurdy, and Liza Mitchell—who are profiled in this newsletter. We hope you will enjoy getting to know these four wonderful young people as much as we have.

Better yet, we hope you will get a chance to meet them: please consider joining one of our outings or volunteer projects this summer so we can get to know you, too! 

Wildfire and Independence Pass

Could the big one happen here?

By Karin Teague

In 2020, the two largest wildfires in Colorado history on record, the Cameron Peak and East Troublesome fires, burned over 400,000 acres, or 630 square miles, of mountainous terrain. The Cameron Peak fire survived a September snowstorm and spread over the mountains into the foothills above Fort Collins and into Rocky Mountain National Park. Highway 14 between Fort Collins and Walden was closed for two months. The fire was not declared 100% contained until 112 days later on December 2.



Cameron Peak fire, October 5, 2020, Denver Post

The East Troublesome fire, which killed two people, crossed the Continental Divide and reached the edge of Estes Park on October 23. On that same day, 1,019 fires were burning throughout Colorado. You read that right: over 1,000 fires burning, on a date when snow would historically have covered the mountains. Pitkin County, where the west side of Independence Pass sits, was the only county in northwest Colorado not to have a major fire in 2020.

How does 2021 compare?

The Cameron Peak and East Troublesome fires answered the question some of us may have had as to whether a high, rocky landscape along the Continental Divide—like Independence Pass—could burn. It can.

Were there certain factors, however, that made 2020 the worst fire season in Colorado history? Most experts have cited unseasonably warm conditions, a lack of moisture, increased recreational traffic across Colorado, and an overabundance of fuels. How is 2021 shaping up, comparatively?

Human-caused climate change has disproportionately impacted Pitkin County and much of the Colorado Rockies, which are warming faster than most other places in the country. Our average temperature has increased 2.39 degrees Fahrenheit since 1895. As of this writing, NOAA's Climate Prediction Center is predicting above average temperatures over the next three months.

As for moisture, much of western Colorado (including Pitkin County) is in extreme drought, and NOAA is predicting below average precipitation this summer. The snowpack on Independence Pass, as measured at the Snotel site near Grizzly Reservoir, was a respectable 91% on April 1, but plummeted to 62% by May 1. Anyone who has been to the summit since opening day knows that the snowpack is, well, evaporating.

As for fuel abundance, the forests that make up Independence Pass—primarily spruce-fir, lodgepole, and aspen—are in fact overdue for a burn. Other than the large fire above Weller Lake in 1980, there have been just a handful of small fires, all less than 10 acres, on the Pitkin County side of the Pass since record-keeping began. This means

there is a lot of fuel, including old growth forests like those in Mountain Boy basin that haven't burned in over 500 years.

With respect to recreation, the US Forest Service and the Independence Pass Foundation are expecting another record season this year, owing to Colorado's booming population and the public's growing and COVID-heightened hunger for the outdoors.

Oh, and according to the US Forest Service, the wildfire season is now 78 days longer than it was in the 1970s.

All of which is to say: conditions are scary-ripe for another serious wildfire season in Colorado, including, potentially, on our beloved Pass.

Is there anything to be done?

In the immediate term, we can't reverse the current warm temps or drought. As for excess fuels, according to Adam McCurdy, ACES Forestry and Climate Director, the fire regime across most of Independence Pass is probably in the neighborhood of 400 years, enough time for a significant, natural buildup of biomass. Prescribed burns, thinning, or other fuel-reduction treatments, even if believed desirable, would generally not be allowed in designated Wilderness areas, like the three that comprise Independence Pass. Wilderness was designed to preserve and protect lands in their "natural condition" — including wildfire burns. Indeed, trees like lodgepole and ponderosa pines need fire to release their seeds from their cones.

As for increased recreation, while we can't ask people to stay home, we can encourage responsible behavior. Eighty percent of fires in the West are human-caused. Both the 1980 Weller fire and

the small Lincoln Creek corridor fire in 2020 were caused by improperly snuffed campfires. Because human-caused fires tend to break out near campsites, roads, and trails—and therefore near people—they pose serious risk to human life.

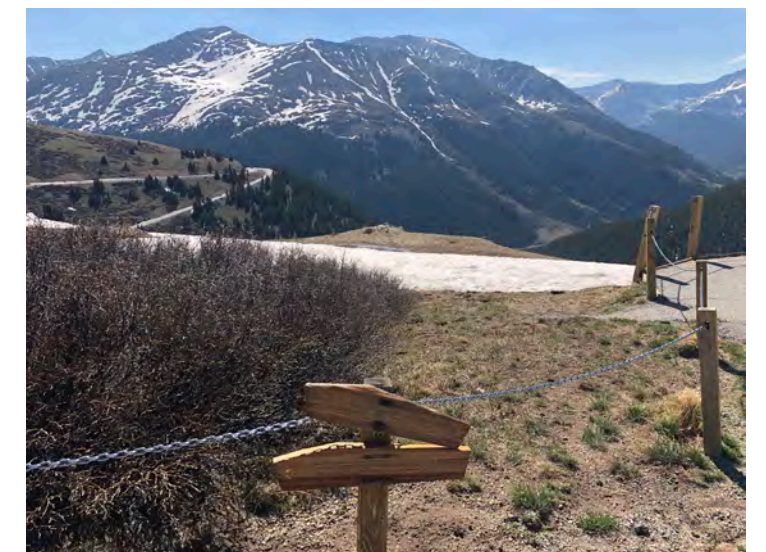
In response, the Independence Pass Foundation and US Forest Service have erected prominent signs in the Lincoln Creek corridor alerting campers to existing conditions and fire restrictions. It is our collective responsibility to know and abide by those restrictions. When campfires are allowed, the Aspen Fire Department advises that campers

- (1) have plenty of water on hand,
- (2) start fires with natural materials and not gas or other flammable materials,
- (3) make sure the area above and around the fire is free of flammable branches or debris,
- (4) leave no fire unattended, and,
- (5) most importantly, put the fire out completely by repeatedly dousing the it with water until it is cold to the touch. Winds can easily pick up still-smoldering ashes and start a wildfire.

Wildfire has always been a natural part of the Rocky Mountain landscape and will continue to be. Independence Pass is no exception. However, owing to climate change and fire suppression measures begun in the early 1900s, the fires we experience now will often be catastrophic. As a group of people who have stewarded the Pass for 32 years—who have planted thousands of trees, studied its rich animal and plant life, and spent countless, priceless hours with our children and grandchildren there—we won't deny it would break our hearts to see it burn. 🇺🇸



Snowpack on June 8, 2019



Snowpack on June 8, 2021

WELCOME, NEW BOARD MEMBERS!

By Gail Holstein



EMILY MAYNARD

Emily has been with IPF since May of 2020, and she's been doing a bang-up job as our secretary. Thirty-three years old now, she graduated from the University of Montana, Missoula, with a major in Spanish. She then went on to get her Master's degree in Environmental Policy.

Talk about outdoors! Emily has worked the last seven years on the Aspen Mountain Ski Patrol, currently as a snow safety and avalanche mitigation specialist. No major disasters during her tenure, thanks partly to Emily's careful attitude. And no big surprise, either, for a girl who grew up chasing around an older brother in Manitou Springs, Colorado, and still sees her parents there.

In case you haven't noticed, finding a job in our valley is quite competitive. Emily is most interested in working in environmental protection and climate change mitigation. If a job there, or one of her other choices, doesn't come about, she will work in landscaping with Tera's Gardens -- planting, mulching, maintaining, to make our valley even more beautiful.

She has been a climber and hiker for quite a while, her favorite spot being Ptarmigan Creek. Backpacking, picking up litter -- you might see her anywhere, as long as it's outdoors.

As for her work for the Independence Pass Foundation, she loves meeting new people and welcoming them into the outdoor community. What a find is our Emily! ■



BRANDON COOPER

A true local, Brandon was raised in Aspen and spent much of his youth on his beloved Pass. That's where he fished and planted trees as a boy and went on his first camping trips. If you see him up there, ask him to tell you about the solo venture during which he was tracked by a mountain lion -- his least favorite animal.

He also learned to ride a bicycle on the Pass, and he still rides there three or four times a week when the weather lets him. His mother Jody Cooper, a mortgage lender at Wells Fargo, still lives here. His wife Maggie and one of his two small daughters, Hannah and Ayla, was born here. You can't get much more local than that.

At age 33, Brandon still has plenty of years left to devote to IPF concerns. As the owner/CEO of Cooper Street Capital, which has apartment complexes all over the west, he feels privileged to be able to work from home -- or from anywhere in the world, for that matter.

Although he lived in the Presidio in San Francisco, and although he met Maggie in Washington, D.C., where she worked for Barack Obama, Brandon missed his beloved mountains. He considers the mountains his "backyard" and worth protecting.

Brandon's main concerns are about the natural world around Aspen: for example, as the Maroon Bells become too popular as a tourist destination, will the Pass be affected -- eventually requiring a bus to go up there? Will traffic have to be restricted during his lifetime? Stay tuned. If anyone is up on these issues, it is IPF's own Brandon Cooper. ■



ADAM MCCURDY

Another lucky recruit for the Independence Pass Foundation is Adam McCurdy. Talk about committed to the environment: Adam and his wife Denali Barron and their baby Rowan live right on the campus of the Aspen Center for Environmental Studies.

Adam's official title at ACES is Forest and Climate Director. He's 34 years old. He and Denali were married in 2017, four years ago already. Denali is on the board of Wilderness Workshop and is an Educator at ACES. Want to bet that Rowan will grow up concerned with the wild world?

Adam came from Brimfield, Massachusetts -- a smaller town than Aspen, with a population of only 3,700. Got his degree from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, with a major in environmental science. Followed by a master's degree at the University of Colorado in geography, specifically concerned with societal adaptation to climate change. He also has worked with children's education and prepares ACES' State of the Forest Report. Wow.

He's another big-time bicycling enthusiast and gets out as often as possible -- less frequently these days, with that baby and all his other concerns. But you can bet on spotting him, possibly with Rowan, up there on the Pass this summer.

He has a favorite book from quarantine: All We Can Save, a compilation of essays and poems about climate change, edited by Ayana Elizabeth Johnson and Katharine Wilkinson. No surprise there either. Adam's biggest concerns regarding the Pass are increased use, and the loss of biodiversity. Again, stay tuned. ■



LIZA MITCHELL

And we have yet another superstar in the IPF galaxy: Liza Mitchell. When she's not taking care of the Pass, she works for Pitkin County as the Open Space and

Trails Natural Resource Planner and Ecologist. That's quite a title for a woman who's only been around for 35 years. She was formerly with the Roaring Fork Conservancy as the education program manager and instructor. Likes kids, of course. She has none of her own yet, but she and her committed partner Dan keep two dogs happy in Carbondale. That's how it goes when you grow up on a farm with many animals in Longmont, but have to limit your collection when you move to the Aspen area.

Liza got her BA in Environmental Science at Colorado College, then picked up a Masters degree in Water Resources from the University of Idaho. Her interest in the outdoors stems from a great backpacking trip in high school. She knew from then on that she'd rather be hiking than sitting behind a desk.

Her favorite animal, believe it or not, is the hummingbird. Her lifetime favorite book is The Little Prince. Her favorite hiking, naturally, is anywhere up the Pass with a good view.

Liza's main concern regarding the Pass -- and all over Colorado -- is increased use and population. She's also worried about the valley's loss of character. But joining IPF is one way to stem those tides, and we consider ourselves blessed to have her with us. ■

2021 VOLUNTEER PROJECTS & PUBLIC EVENTS CALENDAR

July 6 Bird & Wildflower walk with Mark Fuller & Karin Teague
6:30am-11am

July 7 Volunteer project day (project TBD)
8:30am-noon

July 17 Pika Project field training at Linkins Lake
TBD

July 21 Bird & Wildflower walk with ACES & Karin Teague (sign up thru ACES)
8am-1pm

August 4 Volunteer project day with Pitco Weed Advisory Board
9am-noon

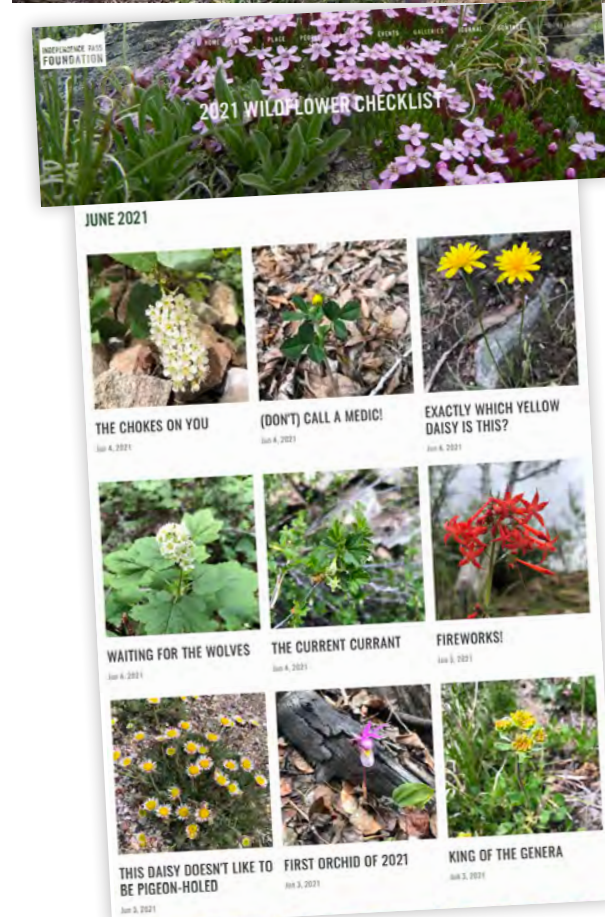
August 7 Linkins Lake trail project with WW, RFOV & USFS
8:30-4pm

August 12 & 13 Green Mountain restoration/cabin removal with WLT & RFOV
9am-3pm

August 21 & 22 Overnight Lost Man trail project with RFOV & USFS
8:30am-4pm

August 25 Green Mountain bird walk with Rebecca Weiss & Karin Teague
8am-3pm

To sign up, please email director@independencepass.org or call 970-274-9690



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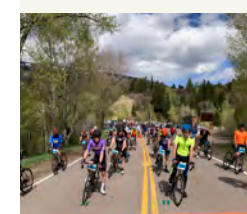
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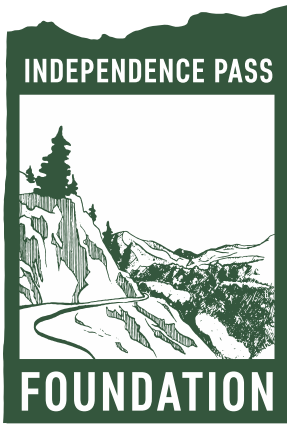
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May your trails be crooked, winding, lonesome, dangerous, leading to the most amazing views.”

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Columbines with a view!

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