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What makes this place special? A common response holds that every animal that was here two hundred years ago is still here today. Precious few places in the lower 48 can make the same claim-therefore, I hope it is true here. But even if all our original species are technically represented, that only means so much. The more important question is whether or not all these populations are currently sustainable, and even more, if they are resilient enough to last another hundred years.

Let's talk about three animals in particular: lynx, wolverines, and fishers. Is there adequate genetic diversity among these three populations to ensure continued survival in the GYE? Is "populations" even the correct word? Who among us can verify the current existence of even two out of three of these iconic mammals in the GYE by personal experience? I certainly can't, nor do I know anybody who can. Not after working as a ranger in five different wilderness areas around the ecosystem; not after walking the lengths of all twelve of the GYE's core mountain ranges. The only time I thought I saw any of these three animals in the ecosystem, I was excited to tell the wildlife biologist at the ranger district where I worked at the time. She all but laughed in my face. "It was probably a marmot," she said, without bothering to ask for details.

These are reclusive animals, true. But go back in the written record and sightings abound. Trapper Osborne Russell described the wolverine as "very numerous" based on his experiences in and around Yellowstone. While skiing through the Upper Geyser Basin in 1887, Thomas Elwood Hofer, wrote "Wolverine and lynx tracks were seen every few rods; one can follow with his eyes the attempts of the lynx to catch a rabbit for his dinner." These accounts are not unusual for their time, but they are unimaginable today. Meanwhile, other animals are becoming scarce within our lifetimes. In a two-week ski traverse in the area a couple years ago, snowshoe hare tracks were unusual enough for me to note them in my journal. I've read accounts of similar trips in the 1990s, during which snowshoe hares, the food source of lynx, were considered ubiquitous. We need places like the Gallatin Range protected to restore this ecosystem to health.

Today, the mere suggestion of having seen a wolverine, fisher, or lynx will either resonate like myth, or, more likely, draw mocking looks of skepticism. Yet, as stewards of this place, we continue to claim these animals as the beneficiaries of our far-sighted management. We consider ourselves the trusted protectors of incredibly vulnerable animals that we cannot claim to understand: animals of which not enough is known to declare them endangered. We act as though the care and consideration we owe the next generation is taken care of. I do not believe it is. But I believe that managing the Custer-Gallatin for its greatest strength-wildlife habitat-would help. And that means Alternative D for the Forest Plan Revision.

I speak of specific animal species because they are representative of the larger health of this place. The Custer-Gallatin has been my backyard since I was a toddler. During my time here, my hometown has more than doubled in size and priced me out. Now I live a half hour away. Meanwhile, I have watched the summer roadways of Yellowstone National Park clog into a map of frustration and disillusionment. In short, Custer-Gallatin country does not suffer from a lack of popular appeal. To the contrary, we are watching its popularity soar to undesirable heights.

Because of these trends I do not believe we should be looking for ways to further popularize our national forest lands. Instead, we should focus on their highest use-their most exceptional qualities-and find ways to ensure the protection of these qualities. This approach is destined to be unpopular with many of the people who are

making money off the exponential growth of some GYE communities (The Custer-Gallatin, of course, is not only fronted by Billings-Montana's largest city-but Bozeman, the fastest growing city of its size in the entire country), or among those backcountry enthusiasts whose sports enjoy skyrocketing popularity. But in the long run, more wilderness is in the interest of developers as much as conservationists. In the long run, our concerns are the same.

There will always be groups who argue that any wilderness is too much. In 1987, the timber spokesman Joe Hinson compared wilderness to herpes: "Once you got it, it's forever." Those of us who live here because we value natural splendor, and appreciate the health of the Custer-Gallatin National Forest's relatively intact wild places, understand that land development most resembles infectious disease. Herpes is a viral infection that breaks out in waves. Meanwhile, wilderness-the best protection for the functioning ecosystems that dwell at this place's heart-represents the antidote. How else to explain the fact that development is invigorated by its proximity to wilderness, but wilderness is only diminished by its proximity to development? Wilderness has always been here: its power drew us here in the beginning, and its preservation grounds us today.

Please designate wilderness in the Gallatin Range. Because I do not believe that it is possible to manage for wilderness character along the main forks of Hyalite Creek, I believe these should be excluded from the boundary.