



SUMMER 2020 \* VOL 14 \* NUMBER 2

# NORTH STAR NEWS

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# Conservation Advocacy in an Age of National Crises

By: Adam Kolton, Executive Director

**T**he moment the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered our physical offices in Anchorage and Washington, D.C., thwarting our ability to personally meet with lawmakers, convene with our partners and allies, or travel across the country to galvanize support for the cause, we knew we had to quickly adapt. After all, the Trump administration continued to rush new drilling, mining and clearcutting schemes on millions of acres of previously protected public lands. There was no time to waste.

I'm proud to say that your team at Alaska Wilderness League has not missed a beat in our fierce defense of these cherished landscapes. Recently, the U.S. District Court for the District of Alaska ruled in our favor and blocked, for the second time, a road through the heart of the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge (see story, page 3), safeguarding 150,000 Pacific black brant, threatened Steller's eiders and many other species that call the Izembek Wilderness home.

We've generated massive public opposition to gutting roadless protections in the Tongass, launching a new digital and print in-state ad blitz making clear that Alaskans oppose these rollbacks. We're also organizing virtual lobby days for League members in key states to press lawmakers to support the Roadless Conservation Act and protect nearly 60 million acres of roadless areas in our National Forest System.

In the Arctic, we recently commissioned a new poll that found that by a four-to-one margin, Americans support policy changes made by major U.S. and international banks to deny financing for any potential oil activity in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. We've also: helped secure strong Arctic Refuge and Tongass language in a new congressional report on fighting the climate crisis; successfully opposed a direct oil company "bailout" as part of COVID-19 relief bills; and supported small Alaska tour operators, outfitters and guiding businesses in seeking economic assistance.

But perhaps more than the direct advocacy or the legal and communications campaign work, we're most proud of our decision to launch the Geography of Hope virtual series (see story, pages 4-5). These webinars featuring award-winning Alaska authors, filmmakers, photographers, artists and adventurers have enabled thousands of you within the League family to be inspired by Alaska's iconic landscapes and the people who depend on them.

These incredible presentations helped remind us of nature's power to act as a place of healing, spiritual renewal and joy during even the darkest times. But unfortunately, recent events have also sent us a stark message that the outdoors is not safe or welcoming for everyone.

The harassment of birder Christian

Cooper in New York's Central Park, following the murder of Ahmaud Arbery while out jogging in late February, show that Americans' experiences in the outdoors vary wildly depending on the color of their skin. And the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Rayshard Brooks and others demonstrate the degree to which racism, police brutality and hatred still plague our society.

Serious dialogue and inspired leadership are needed at every level to change the structures that have resulted in the deaths of countless Black Americans, and to confront the systemic racism that has created stark racial disparities in everything from education to health care to access to the outdoors. Equal access to wilderness in today's America should be a priority for us all, and Alaska Wilderness League is committed to protecting our public lands and waters and to ensuring that everyone, regardless of race, religion or sexual orientation, is free to enjoy outdoor spaces.

Over the last year, we have taken a deep look inside our organization to identify how we can grow and learn in this field. Our journey will never be complete, but we invite you to join with us in doing the long-term work to be a part of the change our nation needs. \*



Adam Kolton  
Executive Director

**Alaska Wilderness League** is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) corporation founded in 1993 to further the protection of Alaska's incomparable natural endowment. Our mission is to galvanize support to secure vital policies that protect and defend America's last great wild public lands and waters.

**Board of Directors:** Former President Jimmy Carter, Honorary Co-Chair, The Honorable Robert Mrazek, Honorary Co-Chair, Tom Campion, Chair Emeritus, Betsy Loyless, President of the Board, Pat Pourchot, Vice President of the Board, Ellen Ferguson, Secretary, Gareth Martins, Treasurer, Midy Aponte, Toni Armstrong, Steve Barker, Kit DesLauriers, Chris Hill, Debbie S. Miller, Lorraine Netro, Brian O'Donnell, Jody Potts, Richard Spener. For questions about our newsletter, please email us at [info@AlaskaWild.org](mailto:info@AlaskaWild.org) or call us at 202-544-5205.

**Cover photo:** Brown bears in Kodiak National Wildlife Refuge. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



us on other routes. The beauty of a sunrise or the vast wildness of the terrain we traveled through often left us speechless.

If only we'd known what we would come home to find.

When we reached our new end point of Nabesna, news from the outside world began to trickle in slowly. The Denali climbing season was canceled. My friend had to lay off 95 percent of her staff from the restaurant group she manages, as they moved to take-out only.

"What in the world is going on out there?" We still didn't know the half of it, and we spent one last night on the snow in semi-ignorant bliss, celebrating the completion of our route.

It was just days later, on my 32nd birthday, that the world crumbled beneath my feet.

"Hope the Classic went well. Dang are you in for a shock when you get back."

The text came through as soon as I returned to cell service. Similar messages poured in over the days to come, but 'shock' hardly qualifies the experience of returning to the new reality of



Emily Sullivan, Alaska Wilderness League

the coronavirus crisis in the U.S. When we left civilization just seven days prior, elbow-bumps were encouraged instead of hugs, and large conferences were being canceled one by one. Universities had extended spring break, but otherwise, business carried on.

We returned to a world where my younger sister had fled her apartment in New York City because her roommate wasn't practicing quarantine. When she told me that she hadn't touched a person in seven days, I finally began to understand the magnitude of the situation. All at once, I learned that I would no longer be able to hug my friends, or even enter their houses.

So, what happens to a dream achieved, but overshadowed by a

global crisis?

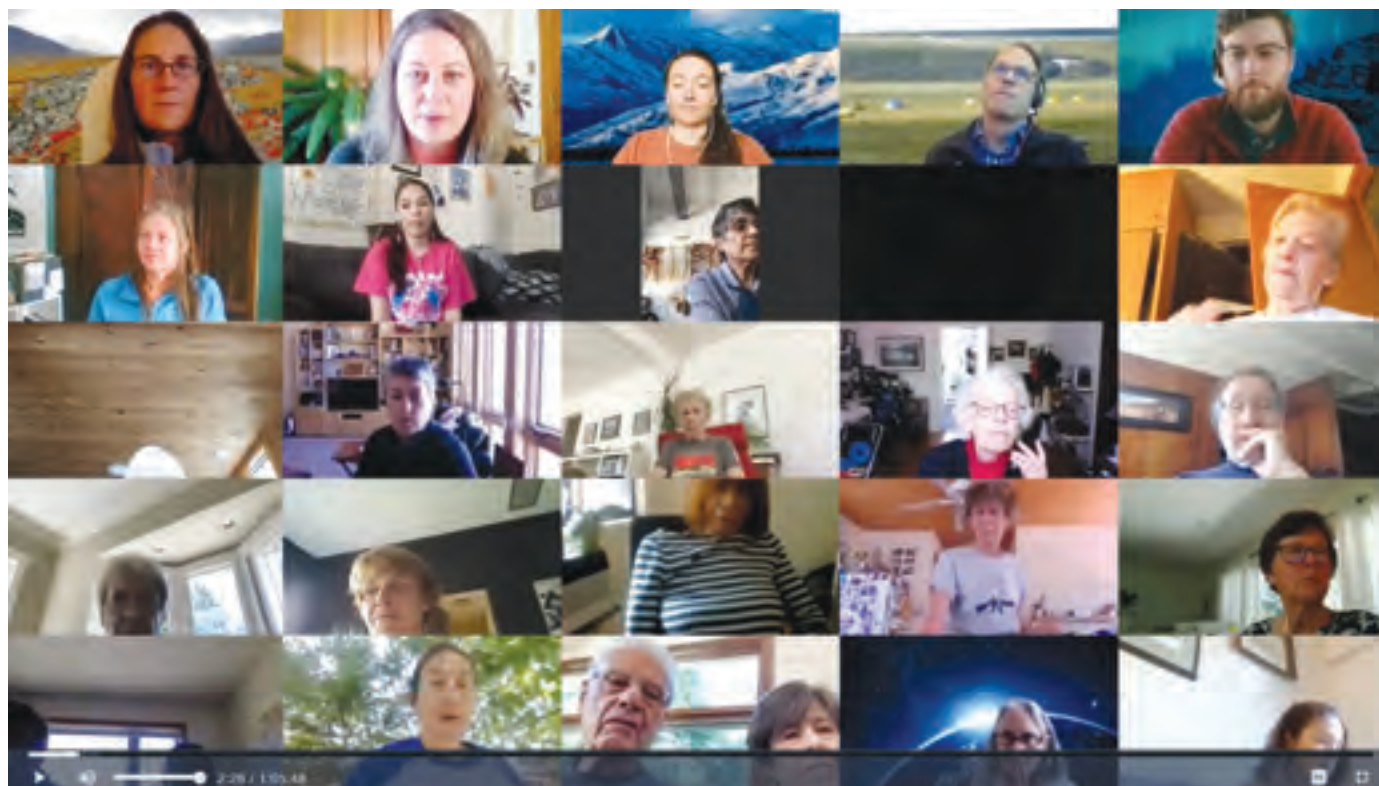
The accomplishment hasn't disappeared, but I'm left wondering how much it matters. We embarked on a journey that meant the world to us. We rode the highs and lows and basked in the mountain glow with friends at the finish. Now that I'm home, navigating complex mountain terrain seems quite simple: survey your surroundings to stay alive. In a world where I'm told to wash my clothes the moment I step in from the grocery store and to not touch my face after touching my mail, I find myself longing to return to the comparative simplicity of avoiding crevasse falls. (*Read the full piece at [AlaskaWild.org/blog/dream-achieved-during-a-global-crisis](https://alaskawild.org/blog/dream-achieved-during-a-global-crisis)*). \*



Emily Sullivan, Alaska Wilderness League

# Forging Connections Through a Geography of Hope

By: Monica Scherer, Director of Outreach and Chris Konish, Director of Development



Alaska Wilderness League supporters join staff and special guests Kristin Gates and Bernadette Demientieff during the first Geography of Hope presentation.

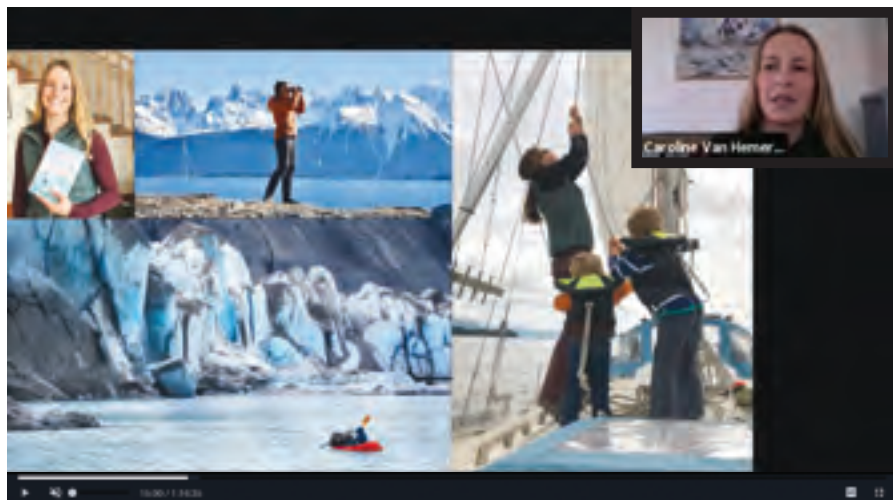
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For many of us, Alaska represents what author Wallace Stegner called “the geography of hope,” a place that captivates and inspires millions who feel our country is richer for having truly wild, vast and largely intact landscapes where herds of healthy

wildlife still roam freely. Where Indigenous peoples live in deep harmony with the land and where the great spirit of adventure can be tested amidst some of the highest peaks and glaciers on Earth.

It was with this in mind that we

launched our Geography of Hope series in early May. This collection of virtual events and experiences seeks to connect our wild Alaska advocates and supporters to writers, photographers, adventurers and filmmakers in a celebration of the lands, waters, wildlife and cultures we all care so deeply about.



Scientist and adventurer Caroline Van Hemert shares images and stories from her trek across the state of Alaska.

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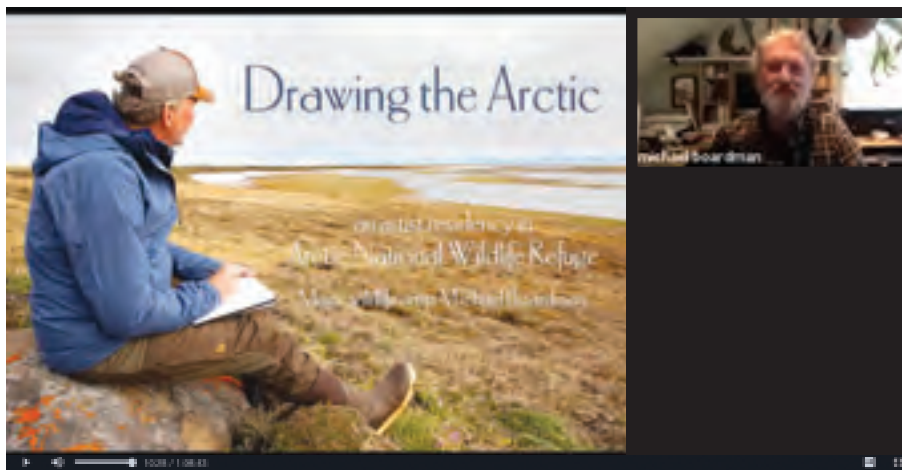
Over the course of the series, hundreds of supporters have joined us for these live events exploring Alaska from the Arctic Ocean and northern coast, down through its vast and varied interior, and ending in the temperate rainforest of the Tongass National Forest. Filmmaker Kristin Gates, joined by Bernadette Demientieff, executive director of the Gwich'in Steering Committee, shared her experiences traveling the Arctic Refuge and time learning from the Gwich'in through



highlights from her film *The Sacred Place Where Life Begins*. Caroline Van Hemert, author of *The Sun is a Compass*, took us along on her 4,000-mile coast-to-coast trek across Alaska. Artist Michael Boardman shared his sketches and anecdotes from his time spent as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Artist-In-Residence for the Arctic Refuge during the summer of 2019 as well.

And as our series headed south, two members-only events provided a unique opportunity to thank our contributing members for their continued support. Author and founding board member of the League, Debbie Miller, transported our members to the sights and sounds of glacier-carved fjords and lush forests in Prince William Sound. And in an exclusive preview screening, filmmaker Mark Titus presented his documentary film *The Wild*, an urgent call to action to protect the beauty of Bristol Bay, Alaska, and its unparalleled salmon runs from the proposed Pebble Mine.

As our series wrapped up, accomplished sailor and photographer David Thoreson presented on his decade of sailing and exploring the



Michael Boardman offers insights and illustrations from his time as Arctic Refuge Artist-in-Residence.

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waters of the Arctic, his time spent in the Arctic Refuge, and the changes he has witnessed over the years in this region due to climate change. And finally, author and photographer Amy Gulick took us through the Tongass National Forest, sharing highlights from her most recent book, *Salmon in the Trees: Life in Alaska's Tongass Rain Forest*.

During each event, we were heartened by the engaging, thoughtful questions and responses we received from supporters in all parts of the country (and the globe, including India!). As the Zoom grid filled our computer screens with names and faces both familiar and

new, and as the participant lists grew throughout the series, we felt increasingly close to our family of supporters and a little less socially distant at the end of each event. We like to think that those who joined us did too.

This summer, there will still be opportunities to engage with other League supporters and accomplished speakers, so stay tuned for announcements of events coming to your inbox soon.

*In the meantime, we encourage you to view recordings of past events on our series web page ([AlaskaWild.org/Geography-Of-Hope](http://AlaskaWild.org/Geography-Of-Hope)) and reach out to us at [Membership@AlaskaWild.org](mailto:Membership@AlaskaWild.org) if you have questions about these events or suggestions for future presentations. \**



David Thoreson presents on his decade of sailing and exploring the waters of the Arctic aboard his boat the Ocean Watch.

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# An Adventure Dream Achieved During a Global Crisis

By: Emily Sullivan, Conservation Associate

**W**e left Anchorage on March 14 chasing a dream of many years: setting out on skis from McCarthy, Alaska, to traverse hundreds of miles of wilderness in the Wrangell Mountains. We'd spent months preparing for the trip and years building the skills we needed to complete it successfully. When we left, coronavirus had not yet been accepted by Americans as a crisis.

At our send-off dinner with friends, I announced that Italy was on lockdown, as I'd only just learned through social media. I joked about how I'd bought my house two weeks too soon to take advantage of dropping interest rates. We speculated about investments. I'm embarrassed to say that the problem seemed small. It seemed foreign. We were thinking only of ourselves.

In McCarthy, we joined 10 other participants for the Alaska Mountain Wilderness Ski Classic, an underground event which starts in McCarthy (year-round population 28) and finishes in Tok, Alaska, almost due north. An Alaska tradition since the 1980s, it's



Emily Sullivan, Alaska Wilderness League

as rugged as wilderness events come: participants travel unsupported across the Wrangell and Mentasta Mountains in winter with no set course. There is only a start line and a finish line, and routes vary from 130 to 200 miles in length.

The stress we endured over that week in the Wrangells was palpable.

For six days, we skied 17 to 30 miles a day. We navigated crevasse fields, built wind walls for our tent in a blowing storm at 7200 feet, assessed avalanche conditions, and spent below-zero nights on snow in sleeping bags rated for 15-degrees. We crossed glacial rivers barefoot and pantless

as the sun sank low in the sky, collapsing in tears into the snow when our numb and bruised feet had finally carried us to the far bank. We became programmed to survey hazards, filing each threat automatically into a bank of information, our heads on a constant swivel as we moved as efficiently as possible through mountains that command respect.

Between the river crossings, bushwhacking, tedious trail breaking and cramponing across narrow ice ridges, we experienced incredible moments of solitude, peace and serenity. Encouragement came in the form of messages in the snow, written by friends ahead of



Emily Sullivan, Alaska Wilderness League



# Good News and Bad News for Alaska Wildlife

By: Corey Himrod, Senior Communications Manager

**F**irst, the good news. For the second time, a federal court in Alaska has shut down an illegal land exchange deal between the U.S. Interior Department and the King Cove Corporation — the deal would have allowed the construction of a road through the heart of the Izembek Wilderness, dealing a blow to Pacific black brant, Emperor geese, brown bears and a stunning array of other wildlife that call it home.

Following the announcement, the League's Conservation Director, Kristen Miller, issued the following statement: "The wilderness values of the Izembek Wildlife Refuge are irreplaceable. Unlawfully giving away public land to build a road right through its heart that could be used for commercial use is characteristic of the Trump

administration's constant catering to private interests. We applaud the court's judgment today. Building a road through federal wilderness would have been a bad deal for taxpayers and a bad deal for the environment, especially when there are other, safer options available."

Now for the bad news. The Trump administration has been hard on wildlife populations in Alaska, and that trend continued as the National Park Service finalized a new rule that allows: the killing of black bear mothers and cubs while they hibernate; the shooting of wolves and coyotes and their pups while denning; and the harvesting of caribou from motor boats as they swim across rivers in national preserves. This administration also green-lighted the baiting of black and brown bears, allowing the use



Wolf pups peak their heads out of their den in Alaska.  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

of items such as dog food and doughnuts to lure bears out of their dens.

There is a real risk that wolf pups, bear cubs and other wildlife will start being killed in ways that have no place in national preserves and national wildlife refuges, however, together with our allies, we'll be looking at ways to pressure public land managers to implement these new rules as narrowly as possible even as we fight for their reversal.

*For more on these rules and how we plan to fight back, visit our blog: [AlaskaWild.org/blog/bad-news-for-alaskas-bears-and-wolves](https://AlaskaWild.org/blog/bad-news-for-alaskas-bears-and-wolves).\**

## Board of Directors Welcomes Newest Member Jody Potts

**A**laska Wilderness League is honored to announce the addition of Jody Juneby Potts to our board of directors.



Jody Potts (center) speaks at a panel on the Arctic Refuge and climate justice at The North Face booth at the 2020 Winter Outdoor Retailer Show.

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Jody is Han Gwich'in and a tribal member of the Native Village of Eagle who formerly served as Vice Chair of former Alaska Governor Bill Walker's Tribal Advisory Council and as a board member to the Alaska Council on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault. She has been an outspoken advocate against the lack of law enforcement and protections for victims of crime in the villages, and has stressed the importance of addressing violence against women and children.

Today, Jody is a dog mushing guide for Arctic Winter Adventures, a snowboard instructor, a traditional Gwich'in tattoo practitioner and Regional Director at Native Movement. Jody is passionate about wellness and safety, but also is an advocate for the protection of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge like her Gwich'in elders and leaders have been for more than 30 years. We welcome Jody and are grateful to have her as part of the Alaska Wilderness League family! \*



# Planning Today for a Wild Alaska Future



## Success for the Next Generation Starts Today

A little planning today can ensure you have the final say on how your hard-earned assets will be distributed so those important decisions aren't left to chance. And no matter the size of your estate, when you include a gift to Alaska Wilderness League in your will, you help provide lasting and impactful resources to aid in the long-term defense of irreplaceable Alaskan landscapes and the wildlife and people who depend on them.

To learn more, please contact Chris Konish at 202-266-0415 or [Chris@AlaskaWild.org](mailto:Chris@AlaskaWild.org), or visit [AlaskaWild.org/Planned-Giving](http://AlaskaWild.org/Planned-Giving).

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