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Kristin Oxford, Host:

Happy Spring, everyone. Or, if like me, you're located somewhere in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, happy early mud season, as we call it, with a sprinkle of surprise Spring blizzards. Thank you for joining us again on Voices of Greater Yellowstone, where we share the stories and science of this remarkable region that we all love. I'm your host, Kristin Oxford.

The beautiful unbroken forests found in greater Yellowstone are an integral part of the ecosystem's overall health and vitality. They provide crucial habitat and forage for its many wildlife species are buffers against the effects of climate change, and offer nearly endless opportunities for solitude and recreation to us human inhabitants of the region. Many of the forests here in greater Yellowstone are part of the national forest system, federally managed lands overseen by the US Forest Service. The national forests found within greater Yellowstone cover just under 15 million acres. That's nearly seven times the acreage found in Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks combined. Needless to say, while Yellowstone and Grand Teton may make up the beating heart of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, the national forests are maybe the torso, the head and a few appendages.

What is a national forest and how is it different from just a regular group of trees, and why are national forest in particular so crucial to the wellbeing of the ecosystem's, waters and wildlife? On today's episode, we are sitting down with the Greater Yellowstone coalition's very own Western Wyoming conservation associate, Teddy Collins. Our conversation focuses on the role national Forest play in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, what GYC is doing to ensure their long-term protection and how you can make a difference for the future of our forests.

Teddy Collins:

My name is Teddy Collins. I am the Western Wyoming Conservation Associate at GYC and the majority of my work takes place in northwest Wyoming and I really think of it as three main areas of work. The first being our work to gain administrative protections on public land, so across forest service land in northwest Wyoming. Another area of my work is involved with wildlife crossings, so trying to make the highways in our region safer for both wildlife species and humans. And then the last part of my work that I am involved in is conflict reduction primarily on private lands between animals and ranchers. Livestock and ungulate conflict reduction and large carnivore conflict reduction.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Got it. Okay. It sounds pretty dynamic. Tell us a little bit about your backstory. How did you find yourself in conservation and then how did you come to be working at the Greater Yellowstone Coalition?

Teddy Collins:

Sure. In 2019, I took a job as a field technician on the Bridger-Teton National Forest. It's where I live. I lived in Teton County, Wyoming for little under 10 years and I took a job as a field technician and the goal of my work was to document roadless areas in the Bridger-Teton National Forest. That lasted for three seasons. And amongst those three seasons, I also worked on a wild and scenic River eligibility

inventory of the Bridger-Teton National Forest. Greater Yellowstone Coalition was one of the partner organizations for these inventory surveys. And in 2021, I had the option or the ability to transition from a part-time contract work role into a full-time role with Greater Yellowstone Coalition. It morphed from seasonal work, inventory work into the position I have now. And I really think it was a great basis for where I live because I spent so much time out on public land, in the National Forest. And so, that segued into my role as the Western Wyoming Conservation Associate.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Yeah, very cool. What's the purpose of doing these inventories that you described, like the Roadless area inventory and the Wild and Scenic River inventory?

Teddy Collins:

It is all in conjunction with the forest planning process, and as part of the forest planning process, a national forest has to evaluate roadless areas for their wilderness potential or their wilderness characteristics. And a national forest has to evaluate stream systems for their wild and scenic eligibility. And these are both based off of the Wilderness Act and the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Okay, so you're out there helping forest managers get the lay of the land, literally?

Teddy Collins:

Basically, yeah. We're providing documents and reports that can be a supplemental resource for the forest service that can hopefully lead to recommendations that can guide the forest and help them make decisions that really benefit landscape and wildlife conservation.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Cool. We're going to dig more into forest planning in a moment, but you mentioned that it was a good transition for you because you spent so much time out in our public lands. Anyway, when you're not working, how do you enjoy spending your time outside?

Teddy Collins:

I really like to think that the seasons dictate my interests and my passions. And we're blessed here in this part of the world with such a variety of areas to explore. In the summer months, I spent a lot of time fly-fishing on my boat. In the fall I spent a lot of time in the woods hunting and through the winter months, I love backcountry skiing and being out in the snow. I really don't have one favorite activity or passion, but I just love the seasonal diversity of this area.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Awesome. Let's go back to the basics. Most folks are pretty well aware of what a national park is. Could you describe what a national forest is?

Teddy Collins:

A national forest is a classification of federal land and it is managed by the United States Forest Service. The Forest Service is a division of the United States Department of Agriculture. When people think of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, a lot of times Yellowstone National Park or Grand Teton National Park

come to mind and it's really important to understand that the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem is this mosaic of land agencies. And apart from National Park Service lands, which are also federal lands, there is Forest Service land, there is Bureau of Land Management Land, and there is also land administered by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

And in addition to these federal lands, there are tribal lands and there is also state land managed by each state. Most of these lands are distinguished really based off of the protections and the uses that exist on the landscape. On one end of the spectrum, you will have a federally designated wilderness area where different types of recreation are not allowed, motorized use is not allowed, primitive types of recreation, there are no roads. And then you can also have Bureau of Land Management lands where resource extraction takes place. There's just a variety of lands within our area and within the GYE and these federal lands differ in the uses and the protections on the ground.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Got it. Tell us a little bit about the national forest of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem itself. Like you mentioned before, we have Yellowstone National Park and Grand Teton National Park really at the heart of the ecosystem. But tell us about the forests that surround those national parks.

Teddy Collins:

Sure. within the boundaries of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, there are five national forests. Those forests are the Custer Gallatin up in Montana, the Shoshone National Forest, along the eastern boundary of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. There's the Bridger-Teton, which is largely what we're discussing today. The Caribou-Targhee forest, which is located in southeast Idaho and the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest, which is in southwest Montana as well. These forests collectively cover just under 15 million acres. And when you look at the GYE, it's important to realize that the majority of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem is national forest land. That is the largest agency within this ecosystem. And I think that speaks for how important these lands are when just so much of the land that we work on and recreate in is national forest land.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

In that you spend a bunch of time out in these landscapes, do you have any particular memories or stories you could share with us of something that you've done in a national forest that was particularly memorable?

Teddy Collins:

During the time that I was a field technician completing these roadless area inventories and wild and scenic inventories, I had the chance to go on a backpacking trip into the Teton wilderness with my colleagues on the project. We were camped up on the Cub Creek Plateau, which is a really unique area because it's just west of the continental divide, just south of the thoroughfare region, which is, as many know, one of the most remote places in the lower 48. And we were camped above 10,000 feet on this plateau above tree line and had a subadult grizzly bear just walk beneath our campsite right at sunset. You could see the Teton Mountains to the west, the wind river range to the south, and it just cemented in my mind how important that location is. And you could see so much of the area on the lands that I'd been surveying and it was just a really special and unique experience and something that stands out from that time as a field technician.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Wow. Yeah, that does sound like the pinnacle, almost like the pinnacle of the GYE experience all in one spot. Sub-adult grizzly, wind river range in sight, Teton in site, that's all of it.

Teddy Collins:

Yeah.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Yeah, amazing. Apart from just being the majority of the lands that we have here in Greater Yellowstone and having clearly some pretty incredible opportunities for recreation and human experiences, what else makes the five national forests important to the grid Yellowstone ecosystem?

Teddy Collins:

The first thing that comes to mind is the habitat that these national forests provide. These forests contain incredible summer range for animals that move long seasonal migrations. There's habitat for threatened and endangered species, and also from an aquatic habitat standpoint, our national forests in this region provide headwater streams to some of the nation's biggest river systems, those being the Mississippi, the Columbia, and the Colorado. There are four subspecies of cutthroat trout, all that reside within the Bridger-Teton National Forest, for example. And apart from the wildlife and the aquatic habitat on the national forest, there's also immense cultural and historic values for tribes. It's not just an ecological value for us working in the conservation field. But I think the habitat is one of the biggest defining characteristics of why these forests are so important.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

And so, because much of your work focuses specifically on the Bridger-Teton National Forest, can you tell us a little bit more about this forest in particular? What are the kinds of things that you can find within this forest? What are some of the defining characteristics?

Teddy Collins:

Yeah. As I stated, there are four subspecies of cutthroat trout on the Bridger-Teton and we have drainages that drain into the Yellowstone River, the Snake River system, the Bear River system that drains into Utah and the Colorado River system, which would be the upper green. Incredible fisheries and aquatic values, some of the longest wildlife migrations documented in the United States take place on the Bridger-Teton national forests. Two of the most widely recognized migration routes would be the red desert to Hoback mule deer migration and the path of the pronghorn pronghorn antelope migration. And there's also just incredible habitat for species such as grizzly bears, wolverines, and Canada lynx. It really is defined by this incredible amount of summer range for ungulates and unfragmented protected habitat that is valued by so many different species.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

In addition to those ecological values that you just mentioned, what are the human factors that influence the forest as well?

Teddy Collins:

Sure. The forest spans 3.4 million acres and has six different ranger districts. And because it's such a large forest, there is a scope of the communities that border it. There are communities such as Teton

County, Wyoming, which is a huge recreation hub and is a global destination for people visiting Grand Teton National Park and entering from the south to Yellowstone National Park. And then as you move south on the forest, there are smaller communities that are heavily dependent on agriculture and livestock and also resource extractions. I think it's just important to recognize the scope of communities that are situated adjacent to the forest just because of its magnitude and its size.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

What are you currently working on to ensure that the Bridger-Teton National Forest stays protected?

Teddy Collins:

A national forest is guided by its forest plan, and a forest plan is a land management plan that decides management prescriptions and administrative protections across the landscape. A plan for a national forest sets the overall management direction and guidance of that national forest. Within the plan, you can have protections for habitat. You can have administrative protections, management prescriptions, and it guides what the forest does on the ground. This is a process that is supposed to occur every 15 or so years. And on the Bridger-Teton National Forest, the plan has not been revised or updated since 1990.

If you look back over 30 years, there are incredible differences specifically to the amount of use and the types of use that occur on the forest. You look back at 1990 and there were threats of large scale resource extraction, energy development, timber sales, and those threats are not as imminent now, specifically to the Bridger-Teton. The largest effects on the landscape are really from us recreating and utilizing the land. And I just think it's important to look back at the changes that have occurred over the last 30 years and recognize that next plan is updated, it could set the guidance for the next 30 years, and how important that is to look back retrospectively in order to look forward and predict what the uses will be in 2060, for instance.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Ooh, 2060. That just gave me goosebumps. Forest Plan is like a snapshot of the challenges and the resources and the use that's happening in the moment when that forest plan was last revised, is that fair to say?

Teddy Collins:

Correct. And that's why it should be periodically revised to recognize the different uses that occur over time.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

What role can an organization like GYC play in that process? Because clearly the forest plan revision is a process that I imagine is led by the Forest Service itself. What influence or role does a conservation organization or even individuals, what role can we play in forest planning?

Teddy Collins:

Our involvement has largely been in generating recommendations that will be presented to the Forest Service. Working with a coalition of organizations to generate recommendations that we hope the Forest Service will use, and we want these recommendations to be valued and to be a durable set of documents that help guide the direction of the forest service. Presenting recommendations on what

areas should be protected for wildlife habitat. The studies and the inventory surveys that I did on roadless areas that have wilderness qualities and eligible wild and scenic river systems, so we can help provide data and recommendations that hopefully the Forest Service will use as this plan revision process kicks off.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Once a national forest decides it's time to update their forest plan, what are some of the steps that occur? What's the timeline look like? Just what is the process of actually taking that on?

Teddy Collins:

There's different phases of the forest plan revision process. The first phase is the assessment phase, and that is when the forest determines the existing ecological, social, and economic conditions of the forest. It basically assesses what is happening on the ground. The second phase is the plan development phase, and it uses the assessment as well as input from the public to approve a forest plan and draft a forest plan. Once that plan is drafted, there is the monitoring phase and that determines whether the plan is achieving the desired conditions, and it also determines if the plan needs to change. It really starts with the assessment phase and that's what we're presenting recommendations on. As the forest undergoes this process of determining the conditions on the ground, that's hopefully where we will provide recommendations that state where we think the highest wildlife values, ecological values, cultural and historical values, where these occur across the entirety of the Bridger-Teton.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

You mentioned earlier when you were talking about federal land as a whole in the [inaudible 00:21:48] that you have things like [inaudible 00:21:49] land where you might see some resource extraction and then you have national forest land, which has different kinds of permissions and protections. One thing that I know that GYC has focused on in other forest planning processes before is the different land designations within the national forest themselves. Could you tell us a little bit about what are some of the types of protections that you could see in any national forest? Something from wilderness to back country areas, what does that look like and how is it decided what pieces of land within a national forest to get different levels of protections?

Teddy Collins:

Sure. Within a forest you will have general forestland that doesn't have a high protection on it. You'll have federal wilderness areas. On the Bridger-Teton National Forest, we have three. We have the Teton Wilderness, the Grova Wilderness, and the Bridger Wilderness. These are designated by an act of Congress. You also have designated wild and scenic river systems, which is at the act that creates administrative protections for waterways and riparian habitat. The forest plan will also result in areas that do not have the highest protection like a wilderness area, but create restrictions on what can and cannot happen on the landscape.

There are backcountry areas proposed which allow for certain recreation types but do not allow for road construction. There are recreation emphasis areas, so areas that are known to have a high rate of use or a valued trail head or a network of trails could be a recreation emphasis area. And then some of the smaller designations that occur could be a wildlife emphasis area, where there's a known area of critical wildlife habitat or a migration route. And there's a spectrum that moves from just general forest land where. For instance, a timber lease could take place and then you move all the way to a wilderness area or a wild and scenic river system.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Okay. Alright. There's lots of different types of designations, and ideally I would imagine they all work in concert with each other to provide the best balance of protections for wildlife and access for recreators and other human uses?

Teddy Collins:

That's the hope. You'd hope they all work in conjunction and complement one another. But I think you also have to realize that the forest has to generate revenue and there are different permit holders, and also every forest is different, and some forests are defined by their resource extraction, and some forests have large areas of timber extraction, and some forests are defined by their ecological and wildlife values. And the Bridger-Teton really is the latter. In this day and age, it's really defined by the ecological resources that exist within its boundaries.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

When you were talking about the steps involved in forest planning, you mentioned that there's possibility for input from the public. If people are really excited about participating in forest planning, how can they both do that and support GYC's work in particular?

Teddy Collins:

The forest planning process really emphasizes public participation at all stages. For people that are interested in getting involved, there will be opportunities to provide public comment, there will be opportunities to attend public meetings. And so, I would recommend that anyone who's passionate about the Bridger-Teton and wants to be involved, just start with the Bridger-Teton National Forest website and sign up for news alerts and notifications. And just understand that as the iterations of this process unfolds, there will be opportunities for comment, and info sessions, stakeholder meetings. This will have public involvement.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Awesome. There's lots to do. And if people want to support your work, how can they do that?

Teddy Collins:

Sure. I would recommend people to sign up for the GYC email list. That way if we do encounter opportunities for public participation, we can reach out to folks on our email list and they can be aware of an upcoming date to provide comment or an upcoming meeting to attend. That's probably the best way for people who want to be involved to stay involved.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Yeah, good call. We can do some of the legwork for them and just let folks know when those comment opportunities do arise. One thing I want to bring us back to is, because I'm realizing that in the course of this conversation, we've used this word wilderness to mean this very specific thing. And when we talk about wilderness in the context of forest planning or for different designations in a forest, we're talking about capital W Wilderness, which is a clearly defined area of land as opposed to the blanket term wilderness where it's like our umbrella term for the back country. Can you spend just a couple more moments talking about how Wilderness, capital Wilderness itself comes into being? Because you

mentioned federally designated, so how far can a forest plan get us in establishing Wilderness and then what happens to actually get that designation locked down?

Teddy Collins:

Sure. As I said, a forest during the forest plan vision process has to evaluate roadless areas for their Wilderness characteristics. Once that has taken place, a roadless area could become a recommended Wilderness area during the plan revision process. And what would have to happen after that is it would have to be legislative action. It would have to be an active Congress where a recommended Wilderness area is presented to become a capital W Wilderness area. And once that would occur, the Wilderness Act criteria would adhere to the landscape. It would only allow for primitive and unconfined recreation types. There would be no road construction, no construction of structures that are outside of what is set forth in the Wilderness Act. Really, the forest planning process is that starting step to eventually designate a Wilderness area.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Okay, got it. Like a national forest can say, "This is a Wilderness quality area," let's say, and they can manage it as though it's Wilderness, but it's until it's actually federally designated, presumably that could get changed at any point during the next forest planning process. Is that correct?

Teddy Collins:

Correct. Yeah. There could be a whole slew of recommended Wilderness areas and they will not necessarily become a capital W Wilderness area, if that makes sense.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Yeah, it's so interesting. Everything as with many parts of life and work, there's always a little bit more complexity than we first assume. Alright, Teddy, so you spend clearly a lot of time thinking about and working in our national forests. Do you have a favorite national forest? And this could be any of the ones in greater Yellowstone or really any national forest across the country?

Teddy Collins:

I think it would be hard for me to not describe my connection to the Bridger-Teton, and I really do think that is my favorite. Both because of the time I've spent on the forest and just the incredible values that I've described. It really is a unique place and it is so near and dear to my heart and so important to the work that I do. The Bridger-Teton Teton is my favorite.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Okay, perfect. Then you're in the right place doing the right thing. Happy to know that. One thing that we really like to ask all of our guests is do you have a conservation hero? This is anybody in your life who you think has been influential in helping you decide to spend your life in conservation?

Teddy Collins:

Sure. I have a few, but I'll just touch on one. And that is Dan Smitherman, who is a person I've worked with and worked for during my wilderness evaluations on the Bridger-Teton. He is the former Wyoming State Director of the Wilderness Society, and he's been a big mentor of mine as I've undertaken my career in the conservation field. He has a long legacy of conservation success. He helped to pass the



Wyoming Range Legacy Act, which protects 1.2 million acres of the Bridger-Teton National Forest from energy development. And what I really admire about Dan is his ability to set aside cultural or political differences in order to advance conservation goals and landscape protections. And it's things that people talk about a lot nowadays, but he really does walk the walk, and he's just a inspirational person and someone who I really hope to live my life by, and he continues to be a great friend and a mentor.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

That's wonderful. Thanks for sharing that with us. Teddy, if you could leave people with one parting thought on the importance of conserving our national forests, what would that be?

Teddy Collins:

I think it is easy to take something that is in your backyard or that you are familiar with for granted. I think it's important to recognize how special and unique the federal lands and the Western United States are, and how it didn't just happen and how they aren't just here randomly, and how fragile they are. They might not be around, and it's up to us to maintain the amazing ecosystems and the landscapes within these federal lands. There's such incredible ecological, cultural and economic resources, and so I would just recommend that people stay engaged and be inquisitive and ask questions about national forests and experience them. I think if you spend time in a place, then you form a bond with it and you're that much more likely to advocate for its protections. I would recommend people to experience the Bridger-Teton. It is such a unique and amazing landscape, and it's up to us to make sure it is maintained.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

Thank you so much, Teddy, and thanks for all the incredible work you do. And of course, thank you for sitting down with us on the podcast today. We really appreciate it.

Teddy Collins:

Thank you. It was great. Thanks so much for having me.

Kristin Oxford, Host:

A big thank you to Teddy for stopping by the podcast and sharing his story and work on Greater Yellowstone's National Forests. Listeners, we also want to know what your favorite National Forest is. Head over to our show notes for this episode and find a link that will take you to the survey. I've already voted for my favorite, the Custer Gallatin National Forest. Don't tell Teddy.

The Voices of Greater Yellowstone Podcast is produced by the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, a nonprofit organization dedicated to working with all people to protect the lands, waters, and wildlife of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. The best way to support the podcast and all the important conservation work GYC does is by giving a gift of any size via the link in the show notes. Thank you for listening, and we'll see you next time.