

Way out in the sticks

Remote ranch provides perfect research setting

By Kyle Jansson

Jim and Holly Akenson aren't expecting many neighbors or friends to visit them during the next six months.

Living in the middle of the River of No Return Wilderness at the University of Idaho's Taylor Ranch Field station, the Akensons live 34 miles from the nearest road, which is a dirt logging road. The Akensons hope, however, that the weekly mail plane — and maybe Santa Claus — will bring greetings from the outside world.

"You definitely get the feeling of remoteness, but you don't get that feeling until you fly in or fly out," said Jim Akenson. "You forget about it when you're living there."

The Akensons manage the 65-acre ranch which serves as a jumping-off spot for scientists from the UI, the U.S. Forest Service and other organizations conducting research in the region which is the largest designated wilderness in the continental United States.

The researchers gather information on plants and animals where man has had relatively little impact on them. The data is valuable for comparisons with plants and animals where man has affected the environment.

The Akensons have been operating the ranch only since September, but have previous experience living in remote places and with natural resources management and research. Both are graduates of Eastern Oregon State College and have worked in a variety of wildlife, forestry, wilderness planning and biology jobs.

They spent two months in a remote area of Arizona determining habitat requirements for nesting southern bald eagles in Sonoran scrubland. Jim, who is pursuing a master's degree at Oregon State University, has been a wilderness planner for the



Baker, Ore., district of the Bureau of Land Management.

The Taylor Ranch manager's job was originally advertised for one person, but the Akensons suggested to the university that since they were each qualified they could share the job.

"The intriguing thing about the job was it offered professional opportunities for both Holly and me," said Jim.

"It's a chance for us to pursue both our career and personal interests," added Holly. "We know we work well together."

The ranch was homesteaded in 1879 by "Cougar" Dave Lewis. Jess Taylor, a hunting companion of Lewis, sold the ranch to the UI in 1969 because he did not

want it opened up to development. It is managed as part of the wilderness.

"Part of the lifestyle we have is to follow the wilderness ideals," said Holly. Motor-driven equipment and machinery are prohibited. There is running water for just six months of the year, and no electricity.

Horses are used to pack in materials that cannot be flown in, to "manicure" the airstrip in the winter, and to mow the airstrip in the summer.

Even after a month of living at the ranch, Jim and Holly had not fully adapted to life in the wilderness. Holly said they still have the habit of trying to find the light switch when they go into the bathroom, but they no longer wait for the non-existent phone to ring.

"The sounds of planes has kind of replaced that," said Jim.

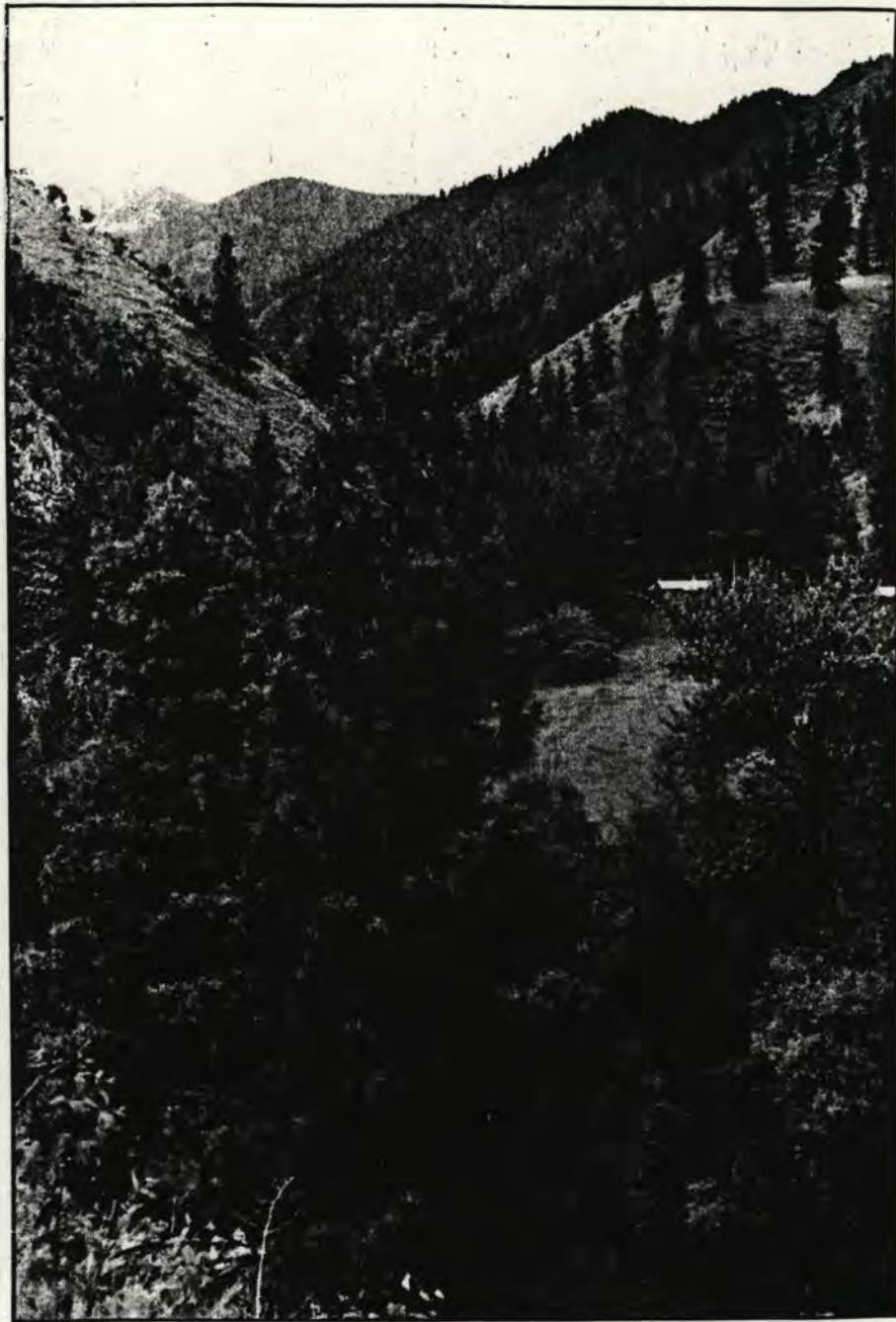
Besides acting as caretakers for the cabin and other buildings, the Akensons assist researchers and extend backwoods hospitality to the infrequent visitors.

"The area is an outstanding laboratory. There's a multitude of projects that can be started," said Jim. About half of the couple's time will be devoted to research.

The Akensons hope to establish a weather station at the Taylor Ranch. The information would provide useful information for changes in vegetation and fauna. The reports would have to be sent out daily by ham radio, which serves as their emergency lifeline.

The mail plane, which sometimes may visit only every couple of weeks during the winter, carries more than just mail. If necessary, it can bring in food and other supplies if they are needed, but the mail from friends and neighbors will always be important.

Holly said, "We appreciate the mail so much more" than when they could get it daily outside the wilderness — when neighbors and friends were often close by.



Secluded is a euphemism for what the Taylor Ranch is. While at the field station, Jim and Holly Akenson are 34 miles from the nearest road.