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Heart of Idaho beats in the Salmon River wilds

To get to the Taylor Ranch Field Research Station in the heart of the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness, you can hike or horseback for several days through some of the more remote and uninhabited country in the continental United States.

Or you can spend 35 minutes on a wilderness plane ride with Walt Smith.

The 29-year-old is a pilot for Arnold Aviation in Cascade, one of several such companies that serve the Frank. Ray and Carol Arnold started Arnold Aviation in 1972. At first, it was a part-time gig, but in 1975 they got the "mail call" business and went full time.

The couple chucked their jobs teaching in Cascade. Ray took to the skies. Carol took reservations and grocery orders.

They do it year-round. These days, they fill 35 to 40 weekly grocery lists in the summer, when it's "way more" busy, and deliver mail and people — friends, relatives, campers and hikers — to about 21 airstrips scattered throughout the wilderness. Then there are the hunters.

"Last year we took 250 hunters in and out of the Frank," Ray says.

It's a big place, yes, he says, "and it's a lot bigger on foot." Flying a small plane into the wilderness can be daunting. "There's a saying about flying: 'It's better to be on the ground wishing you were in the air than being in the air wishing you were on the ground.'"

Pilot Smith spirals the circa-1977 single-engine Cessna 206 ("made a month after I was born") down a steep, narrow canyon.

Today, none of Smith's passengers use the "sick sacks" but they find the fluorescent orange earplugs useful. It's a loud, short, and at times, white-knuckled plane ride. Air currents whistle through canyons, bubble up over mountains and buffet the small plane, which holds a maximum of five passengers. Smith deftly maneuvers the plane through a dizzying turn, a stomach-lurching roller-coaster dive, and into a sudden landing. The plane, with nose-down tricycle landing gear, bumps to a stop at the end of the remote airstrip at the Taylor Ranch research station.

The 65-acre Taylor Ranch lies between the Middle Fork of the Salmon River and Big and Monumental creeks, 36 miles from the nearest road. It was once an outfitter's ranch owned by Jess and Dorothy Taylor. They sold it to the University of Idaho in 1969 as an educational and research facility. Now, through grant and intern programs, lucky U of I students, including at least 19 this year, get to spend summers here.

Meet the Akensons

Jim and Holly Akenson do multiple jobs as managers, research biologists, teachers and mentors for students. This is their second stint. They were here from 1982 to 1991 and returned in 1998. They and their students conduct research on wolves and bighorn sheep. They document bobcat, bear, cougar, fish and rattlesnakes. They watch how cougars and wolves interact.

"It's like National Geographic in Idaho," Jim says.

"The wilderness is a wonder," echoes Holly. "This place has more wildlife than Yellowstone. We see (bighorn) rams butting heads — they make a sound like chopping wood."

They've had "bears in the garden, cougars in the airstrip," Holly says, laughing. "In a sense, our role here is to live with the environment, not to conquer it."

"Our mission is understanding, describing and sharing with the natural world," Jim says. "Being here is somewhat of our life destiny."

You could say their destiny has been forged in fire. The 175,000-acre Diamond Point Fire swept over the field station in August 2000, and the Akensons had to flee Taylor Ranch on muleback. "You're at the mercy of nature — you make the wrong decision, you die. You make the right decision, you live," Holly says.

With their backwoods forensics, the Akensons could star in "Wilderness CSI." They understand the world around them as only wilderness biologists can. They can tell how a cougar died from starvation: He had lost two of his "toes" and couldn't kill prey. A coyote, killed by a cougar, had been living on borrowed time: "See these puncture holes here, and here, by his ear?" Holly explains, holding the animal's skull. "He was probably deaf. The puncture wounds were healing when he got in this last fight."

A trail at Taylor Ranch follows Big Creek. It's the same trail, she says, that everyone takes, whether traveling on two feet or four.

"Look, there's a bear footprint," she points out, reading the trail like a newspaper. Farther on, she points out a natural salt lick, wolf tracks, a tree that serves as the wolves' marking spot — it's stained a dull yellow and sports a wolf hair or two. Here is where the elk like to rub off their velvet — it itches. Here, the elk and deer have nibbled a bush down — that's because it's close to the trail, easy to reach, she says.

At an outcropping of rock, Holly asks: "Can you see the pictographs?"

The Sheepeaters

The Tukudika, Sheepeaters, were a Lemhi Shoshone Indian band who lived along Big Creek for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years, in the wilderness area. There are signs of them everywhere — pictographs, projectile points, "house pits" — a group of round depressions where they made their winter homes, weaving tents so they could stay by the river, close to the bighorn sheep.

The Sheepeater Indian War of 1879 drove the Sheepeaters from their homes, first to Vancouver, then to Fort Hall. "The biggest thing we're missing here is not the clear pristine water or the trail-less vistas — it's the indigenous people," Jim says.

As an Army private said at the end of that campaign, "So ends the never-to-be-forgotten campaign of 1879. A number of animals made useless and men badly used up."

'Cougar Dave'

Taylor Ranch is served by no utility company. To have those kinds of luxuries, you have to rig them up yourself. If something breaks, you fix it, following how-to instructions on the Internet, if you're lucky enough to have a satellite dish, as the Akensons do.

Life is pretty primitive at Taylor Ranch, although there's running water and electricity provided by a hydroelectric rig the Akensons fixed up — when it's working. The satellite dish provides wireless Internet and brings Jim the History Channel.

Before the Taylors owned the ranch, it belonged to "Cougar Dave" Lewis, who lived from 1844 to 1936. He became an outfitter of some renown, homesteading on the property. He got his nickname as a cougar trapper. His lodge, more than 100 years old, is still standing.

Lewis, who was known as a crotchety old man, also had a lesser-known tender side, Jim says. In the lodge, he kept a secret picture of the woman who had spurned his marriage proposal. The picture was discovered, Jim says, facing the wall, in a locked room filled with cobwebs.

In pursuit of solitude

Jesse Davis is 22. He's a graduate of U of I with a major in fisheries and a minor in wildlife.

Like the Akensons, Davis communicates with the outside via e-mail, but it's a dicey connection. With spotty wireless coverage, he sometimes chats with his girlfriend, laptop perched on the edge of his bathroom sink, that evening's hot spot.

Davis doesn't mind the isolation. "I think a lot of people who come out here like the solitude. You get a plane that flies over once in a while, and you kind of get reminded of the outside."

Davis is nearing the end of his second stay at Taylor Ranch. Last year, he stayed through a grant he'd written to study cutthroat trout. This year, he's doing a stint as assistant manager.

His studies last year involved examining the diet of cutthroats. He did most of his research at night. Donning snorkeling gear, he jumped into Big Creek, caught live cutthroats, pumped their stomachs for content, documented the results, then released them back into the river.

"Living out here — it's like a story of the past," Davis says. "Not even many of our relatives have had the opportunity to do this. For our generation, it's more like stories."

To offer story ideas or comments, contact reporter Jeanne Huff at jmhuff@idahostatesman.com or 377-6483.