



WINTER 2021 \* VOL 15 \* NUMBER 3

# NORTH STAR NEWS

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# A Year of Highs and Lows Still Yields Promise for the Future

By: Kristen Miller, Acting Executive Director

For many, this time of year is a time of family gatherings, celebration, reflecting on the past year and looking ahead to what the future will bring. For the staff and board of Alaska Wilderness League, it's been a year of highs and lows, welcoming a new presidential administration intent on protecting wild Alaska, but also losing dear members of the League family. First, the tragic passing of executive director Adam Kolton in April at the age of just 53. And then we were deeply saddened to share the news earlier this fall of the passing of longtime friend and colleague John McComb. John was a longtime conservation advocate, a former legislative director at Sierra Club, and a beloved member of the Alaska Wilderness League family for more than 20 years.

John was a constant in Alaska Wilderness League's D.C. office, as a consultant, but more importantly as a friend. He never met an Alaska issue on the Hill he couldn't track and analyze through a multi-tab spreadsheet, and his dedication to preserving the country's wild places at every level touched countless people across the country —

whether they realized it or not. His legacy will continue in our work to protect places like the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Toward that end, we're happy to share in this issue a piece written by Brooks Yeager and Cindy Shogan — Cindy, as you likely recall, was formerly executive director of the League for more than 18 years, working side-by-side with John for countless years. (Her partner, Brooks, is an environmental policy consultant and served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Environment under former President Bill Clinton.)

On the campaign front, we'll continue to move forward and honor the legacy of those we've lost. We'll continue to fight for the protection of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and the restoration of roadless protections for the Tongass National Forest. We'll continue to press for an end to the climate crisis through the protection of essential public lands like the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska in the western Arctic and areas offshore of Alaska. And we'll continue to champion wild places as a necessity of the human spirit, not

a luxury to be enjoyed only by the privileged, and that equal access to those places in today's America should be a priority for us all.

This time of year also brings thoughts of giving back, whether through volunteering, philanthropy, or simply taking a moment to show compassion for another. You and so many others have stepped up throughout 2021, to support us during difficult times and otherwise ensure our work can continue in a strong way. As you make your year-end plans to contribute to the causes you care so deeply about, we hope you will continue to think of Alaska Wilderness League and give generously to the fight for protecting Alaska's wildest places.

And with that, and on behalf of the entire Alaska Wilderness League family, I want to wish you a happy and healthy holiday season, and a new year filled with conservation victories for wild Alaska! \*

Kristen Miller  
Acting 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.

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**Cover photo:** A pair of walrus cows in the Arctic. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Alaska

# The League Says Goodbye to an Old Friend

By: Brooks Yeager and Cindy Shogan

It is no exaggeration to say that John McComb did for environmental campaigning what the early incarnations of Facebook did for social networking. He built a world of information that made it possible to reach more people, with more impact and to bring their voices into the political system as a critical part of the struggle to conserve wilderness and public lands and to protect the environment.

We worked together with John for more than 35 years, first at the Sierra Club, and then at Alaska Wilderness League. We were campaigners first and later took on other roles when Cindy moved over to run the Alaska Wilderness League and I joined the Clinton administration. All along, John was our favorite coach, our best mentor, and our good friend. He was warm-hearted, generous to a fault, and immensely patient as we took the first halting steps into the world of data and information flows that he taught us to understand and utilize.

Like many of the real geniuses of the computer era, John was not first and foremost a hardware guy. His first question, as he helped NGO



Alaska Wilderness League

(Non-governmental Organization) after NGO move into the computer age, was not 'what kind of computer do you want?' but 'what do you want the computer to do for you?'. He made us think about what information was for, and how it could be mobilized to make campaigning more effective. He was an information architect. And a real one — when we opened the Wayburn Wilderness House, home to the Alaska Wilderness League's D.C. office, he created a campaign boiler-room where incoming activists would each have computer access and links to all the information sources available. When the Alaskans worked into the night, John was always there to help, to fix problems, and to trade campaign stories.

In every campaign the League conducted, John was there, assembling data, creating target lists, ranking votes, rating Congress, and designing customized lobby report forms, which we all learned to fill out in triplicate. He taught us how to win votes, and he taught the League of Conservation Voters how to rate them. He taught us how to read the political world for information, from mapping



John and League staff catch a Washington Nationals game in downtown D.C.  
Alaska Wilderness League

*(continued on page 11)*



# Winter Denning Means Springtime Cubs, but Polar Bears' Future Depends on Us

By: Corey Himrod, Senior Communications Manager

**W**hen you think of the Arctic, certain things might immediately come to mind. Ice, for one. Freezing cold temperatures, for another. If you follow the news then you may also reflexively think of climate change. But when it comes to wildlife, no species is as synonymous with the northern tip of the planet as the mighty polar bear. As our friends at Polar Bears International would say: "From fur to skin to paws and claws, the sea bear's physique is designed to protect them from the cold, hunt seals, and dominate the Arctic."

Late fall into early winter is a critical period for the species. October and November are the months when soon-to-be mother bears — having stored

up as much fat as possible during the summer — seek out a location for their winter den before giving birth.

It's important to mention at this point that, according to both the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Geological Survey, polar



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bears in the U.S. — in particular, the Southern Beaufort Sea population — have historically built dens out on Arctic sea ice, a crucial sea platform also used for hunting and traveling long distances. But as temperatures have risen, sea ice has receded: According to NASA, sea ice concentrations have declined by 13 percent each decade since 1979, and as a result, several polar bear populations are declining as well.

So, what's a polar bear momma to do?

Pregnant females are increasingly coming onto land to build their dens and ride out the winter with their cubs. You might have heard us here at the League talk about the importance of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge — specifically its coastal plain — for polar bear denning, and there's a good reason for that. That section of the refuge, in the northeast corner of Alaska, contains landscape features that help the formation of snowdrifts. And snowdrifts are important because they form the base of a good

snow den! Momma bears will dig a small snow cave in a snowdrift barely large enough for her to turn around in, and then wait for new snow to close the entrance.

Polar bear cubs are most often born in December, and the family will stay there until springtime. A mother bear can have anywhere from one to three cubs, but having twins is most common. The den itself is an important defense against the cold Arctic winter, providing relative warmth and stable temperatures for the tiny cubs — barely 1 pound and between 12-14 inches long — who are born hairless and helpless.

Mom and her cubs will generally

emerge in March or April — federal agencies have noted that “females emerging later from dens had higher reproductive success.” The cubs will nurse for up to twenty months while they learn how to hunt and survive in the Arctic, before heading out on their own.

So, this winter, as you huddle around the fireplace or relax beneath some blankets, share with your loved ones the story of polar bear mommas and their cubs curled up tight in their dens. They are a species highly dependent on sea ice and greatly impacted by climate change, and it's up to us to change our ways and make sure polar bears don't disappear forever. ✨



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# The League Teams Up With Love Is King for Operation ROAM

By: Monica Scherer, Director of Outreach

**T**he partnership between Alaska Wilderness League and Love Is King was long in the making, and this summer it enabled five Black leaders from across the country to experience the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge up close and personal and hear firsthand from Gwich'in leaders on the ground. The initial "Operation ROAM" expedition spent seven days camping, fishing and exploring in the refuge, and trip participant Mic Crenshaw's own words capture exactly why experiences like this one are so critical as we work to expand support for protecting the Arctic Refuge and Alaska's public lands, fighting climate change, and addressing environmental justice:

“Paradise is in trouble, and when the top of the Earth is threatened, all else is in peril. I have this awareness now and I cannot ignore it. What can I do to contribute to spreading this awareness and simultaneously protect the sanctity of the land, wildlife and people who were here first? Those are the questions firmly planted in my imagination now. Let the work begin.”

Mic Crenshaw (right) preps a portable raft for the journey.

Mic Crenshaw



Operation ROAM participants reach the Arctic Ocean coastline. Mic Crenshaw

Now comes the task of carrying this work forward, but even in the short time since the participants returned, several exciting projects have reached the finish line. I was honored to sit in on a podcast with Operation ROAM participant Solamon Ibe of Rose City Justice to discuss the Arctic Refuge. In addition to releasing his new album *Earthbound*, Mic Crenshaw — rapper, spoken word artist, poet, activist and educator — wrote a blog for the League that you can find at [www.AlaskaWild.org/blog/mic](http://www.AlaskaWild.org/blog/mic) chronicling his experience and takeaways from his time in the Arctic. And we recently welcomed three Operation ROAM trip participants to our Geography of Hope series, the third episode of our third season.

Speaking of which, our third season of Geography of Hope — a milestone we didn't even know was possible when we started planning episodes back in April 2020 — is rolling on, and we're so appreciative to all the amazing guests who have joined us and to all of you who continue who join us month after month! Biologist John Schoen kicked us off in September with a scientific look at the Tongass National Forest ecosystem and the importance of science to conservation efforts. Max Romey shared his unique connection to the Alaska wilderness and how his journey along a 150-mile forgotten trail helped shape his understanding of the world and his role to preserve it.





Love is King and *Soul River* founder Chad Brown on the Yukon River.

Mic Crenshaw

If you missed any of these episodes you can always find the recordings on YouTube at [YouTube.com/c/KeepAlaskaWild](https://www.youtube.com/c/KeepAlaskaWild) and our program page at [AlaskaWild.org/Geography-Of-Hope](https://www.AlaskaWild.org/Geography-Of-Hope).

I am also excited to announce that we have launched Geography of Hope as a podcast — you can find it on PodBean at [GeographyOfHope.Podbean.com](https://www.GeographyOfHope.Podbean.com). And we'll continue in the new year with photographer Steven Kazlowski, who has spent decades traveling to the Arctic to capture polar bears, seals, and other iconic wildlife. Our third season will see programs run through July, and I look forward to seeing you at an event soon! \*



(Center) Photographer, Mic Crenshaw. (Left) Camping on the Arctic Refuge coastal plain. (Right) Chad Brown and his service dog Axe on the Arctic Ocean coast.

Mic Crenshaw



# What Is a Land Acknowledgment?

By: Kayla Heidenreich

**A** land acknowledgment is a formal way to recognize the Indigenous peoples who have come before you, and who were removed — often violently — from their land due to colonization. It is a way to acknowledge the vital relationship between Indigenous peoples and the land while recognizing that these people still exist and practice their cultures today. Land acknowledgments are one small way to bring to light treaties and broken promises.

There are many ways to conduct a land acknowledgment, and it starts with researching who's land you are living and recreating on. Using websites such as Native Land Digital ([Native-Land.ca](https://native-land.ca)) and Whose Land ([Whose.Land/en](https://Whose.Land/en)) are great places to start. Combining good intentions with correct information is the perfect way to create a good land acknowledgment.

## Why Are Land Acknowledgments So Important?

Land acknowledgments are meant to be done out of respect and a willingness to educate oneself on the historical — and current — mistreatment of Indigenous peoples. They are meant to have education behind them. Colonization has displaced and killed Indigenous people across the globe who have existed since time immemorial. Today, these people still face the traumas of colonialism.

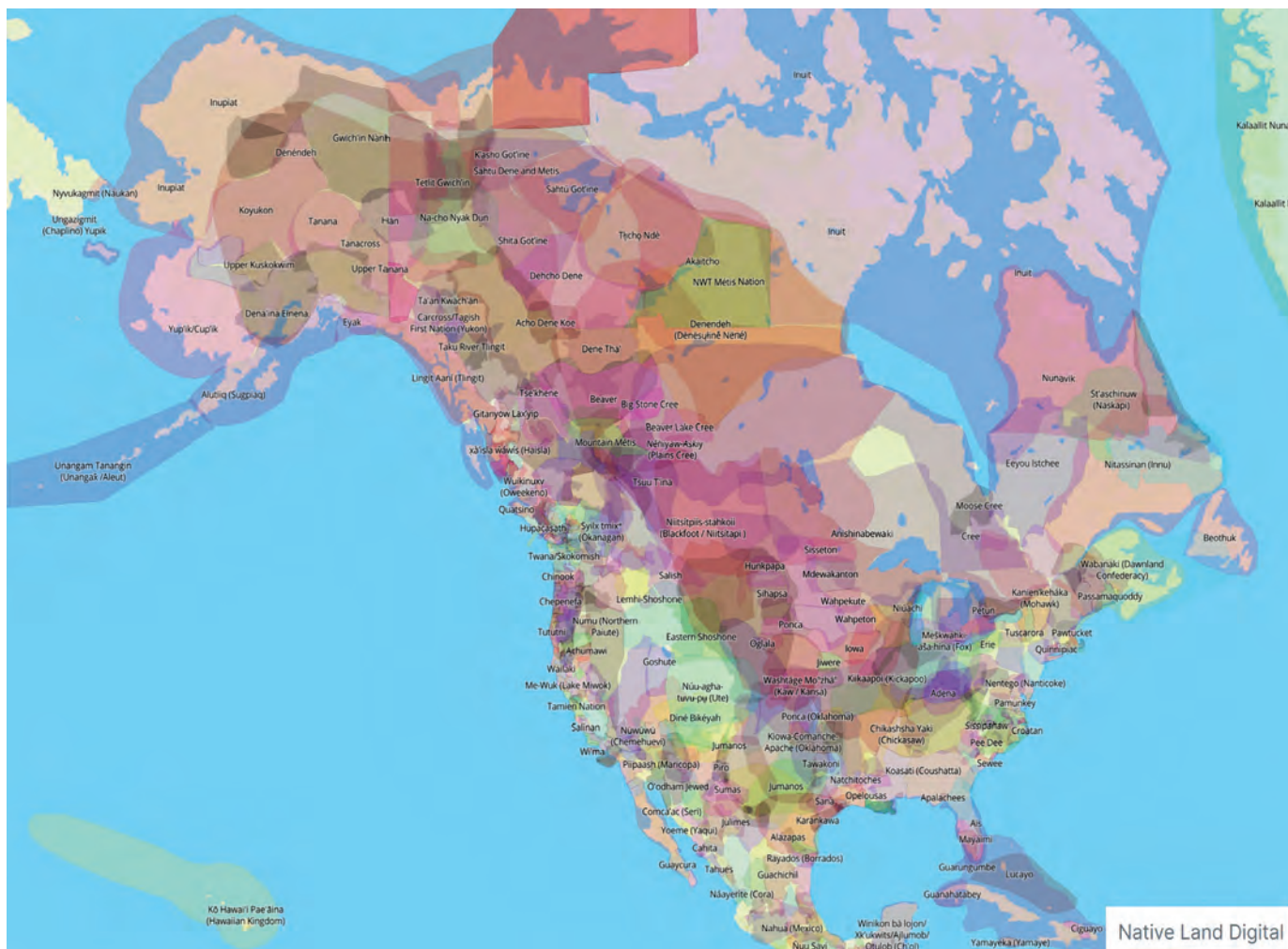
The Gwich'in people of Alaska and Canada have been fighting for decades to save land sacred to them in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and their way of life from destructive oil drilling. The Western Shoshone people of Newe Sogobia (unceded land extending



Three Washoe women standing in front of their sacred land in Nevada.

Kayla Heidenreich





Interactive map via Native Land Digital.

[Native-Land.com](https://native-land.com/)

south from western Utah and eastern Idaho through the eastern half of Nevada and into the Mojave Desert in southeastern California) are considered the most bombed Indigenous nation on earth due to the 900+ nuclear tests that have been conducted by the U.S. government on their sacred land. The Washoe Tribe of Daowaga (Lake Tahoe) are fighting to change the extremely derogatory name of the Squaw Valley Ski Resort in northern California — the term “squaw” has historically been used to describe Indigenous North American women and is considered offensive, derogatory, misogynist, and racist.

## How Can Our Future Benefit From Learning About Land Acknowledgments?

Making land acknowledgments the norm would be an important step and would help to provide students with a richer and more accurate picture

of our history and the history of our continent, and the impacts of colonization on the Indigenous peoples already inhabiting these lands. Indigenous people have coexisted with the land since time immemorial and, especially in this time of climate change and environmental destruction, there is much we can learn from their traditional knowledge. Land acknowledgments open the door to allowing us to learn new ways to better coexist not only with each other but with the entirety of the planet. \*

*Kayla Heidenreich is from Bellingham WA, traditional lands and territories of the Coast Salish and Nooksack Tribes. This piece was lightly edited for space — read the full article at [AlaskaWild.org/Blog](https://alaskawild.org/blog). Alaska Wilderness League recognizes that our offices are located on the traditional territories of the Dena'ina (Anchorage), Anacostan (D.C.), and Piscataway (D.C.) peoples.*



# A New Initiative Aims To Inspire Alaska Stories, Storytellers

By: Chris Konish, Director of Development

**O**n November 15, the Alaska Wilderness League community came together to celebrate our late director, Adam Kolton, with a virtual event, “Carrying the Torch for Alaska’s Wildest Places.” Amidst the many tears and laughs that were shared throughout the event, Adam’s unwavering optimism shined through, especially when looking ahead to the future for wild Alaska.

His passion for storytelling was also on display, as members of his and the League’s family expressed throughout the event. Adam knew the importance of crafting a good narrative, and how it could move hearts and minds to achieve great things.

A good story can bring people together. It can unite staff and

volunteers working to advance a common goal. It can transport an audience — no matter the size — to experience unparalleled wilderness without ever stepping foot on the land. When done at its best, a good story can bridge connections, cutting across cultural and linguistic divides to arrive at a shared understanding.

Adam used this powerful tool when inciting the masses to take action for Alaska’s wild lands and waters. He used his trademark “Kolton crescendo” to make our case in the halls of Congress and in the media, always ready with a quip or entertaining remark to drive the narrative and hammer home the importance of strong wild Alaska protections.

When Adam passed away, we lost one of the truly great storytellers



Adam Kolton speaks at a 2019 League event in Seattle.  
Alaska Wilderness League

for Alaska and its wildest places.

Today, however, Alaska Wilderness League is working to empower the next generation of storytellers, to carry the torch for iconic landscapes like the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and the Tongass National Forest.

We are pleased to announce a new initiative — the Adam Kolton Alaska Storytelling Grant — to make this possible, and to support emerging storytellers so that others may also be inspired to protect Alaska’s wildest lands and waters.

This new grant program — supported by your donations to the Adam Kolton Memorial Fund — will grant up to \$20,000 to an Alaska storyteller each year. The awarded project will take numerous shapes, from



Adam Kolton at a 2005 rally on Capitol Hill to protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Alaska Wilderness League



works of art, to videos, writings, performances and more. The grant will support the creation of a new story or the broader telling of an existing one and will forge a partnership between the League and the recipient to elevate their story where it can

make a difference.

The application process will be rolled out in 2022, the same year that an inaugural grant recipient will be selected.

For more information about

the Adam Kolton Alaska Storytelling Grant, visit [AlaskaWild.org/Kolton-Grant](https://AlaskaWild.org/Kolton-Grant).

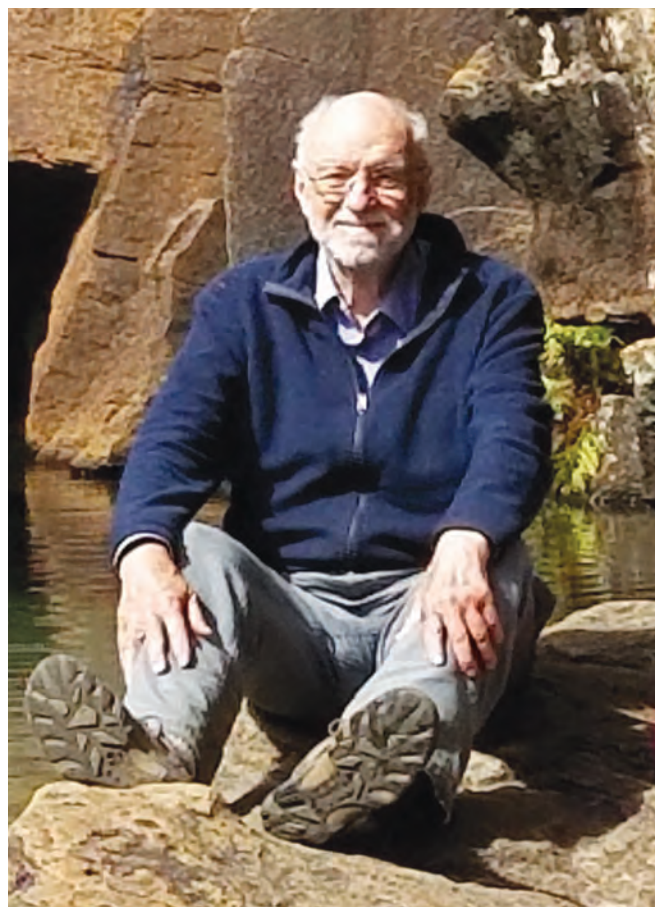
And to learn more about contributing to the Adam Kolton Memorial Fund, visit [AlaskaWild.org/AKMF](https://AlaskaWild.org/AKMF). \*

### ***The League Says Goodbye...***

*(continued from page 3)*

congressional representatives' networks of friends to recalling the paintings and awards on their office walls. Every bit of data was a clue for John — a clue to how to reach, how to persuade, how to bring politicians on-board a cause. He saw the possibilities before anyone else did.

John was both tireless and humble. He rode his bicycle to work and back every day, and when he was there, he helped in every way he could, from licking envelopes to impersonating politicians in skits during activist trainings. He could be boisterous, and he loved a good single malt, but what he reveled in most was the human contact of a good campaign, and all the questions, surprises



John on a trip to Australia in 2018.

Alaska Wilderness League

and challenges that he could help us confront. He was an always reliable one-person resource of good cheer and superb competence. His penchant for photographing everything in sight, from our softball games to our nights out, will leave us all with an inexhaustible supply of stories and memories. But the best memories will be of him and his gentle way of being a friend and of guiding all of us in the right direction. \*

*Cindy Shogan served as executive director of Alaska Wilderness League for more than 18 years. Brooks Yeager is an environmental policy consultant and served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Environment under former President Bill Clinton.*




John receiving *The Wilderness Society Award* in 2006. Alaska Wilderness League



# A legacy gift that pays you back

A charitable gift annuity with Alaska Wilderness League is a gift that pays you income for life while helping to protect Alaska's wildest places for generations to come. You can also qualify for a variety of tax benefits, including a federal income tax charitable deduction when you itemize.

For additional information, please contact [Chris@AlaskaWild.org](mailto:Chris@AlaskaWild.org) or visit [AlaskaWild.org/Planned-Giving](http://AlaskaWild.org/Planned-Giving). We would be happy to work with you and your advisors to answer your questions.

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