WILDLIFE

The Trump administration's repeal of the roadless rule could threaten wildlife

A 2001 policy restricts road construction on Forest Service land. What happens to at-risk species if it's removed?

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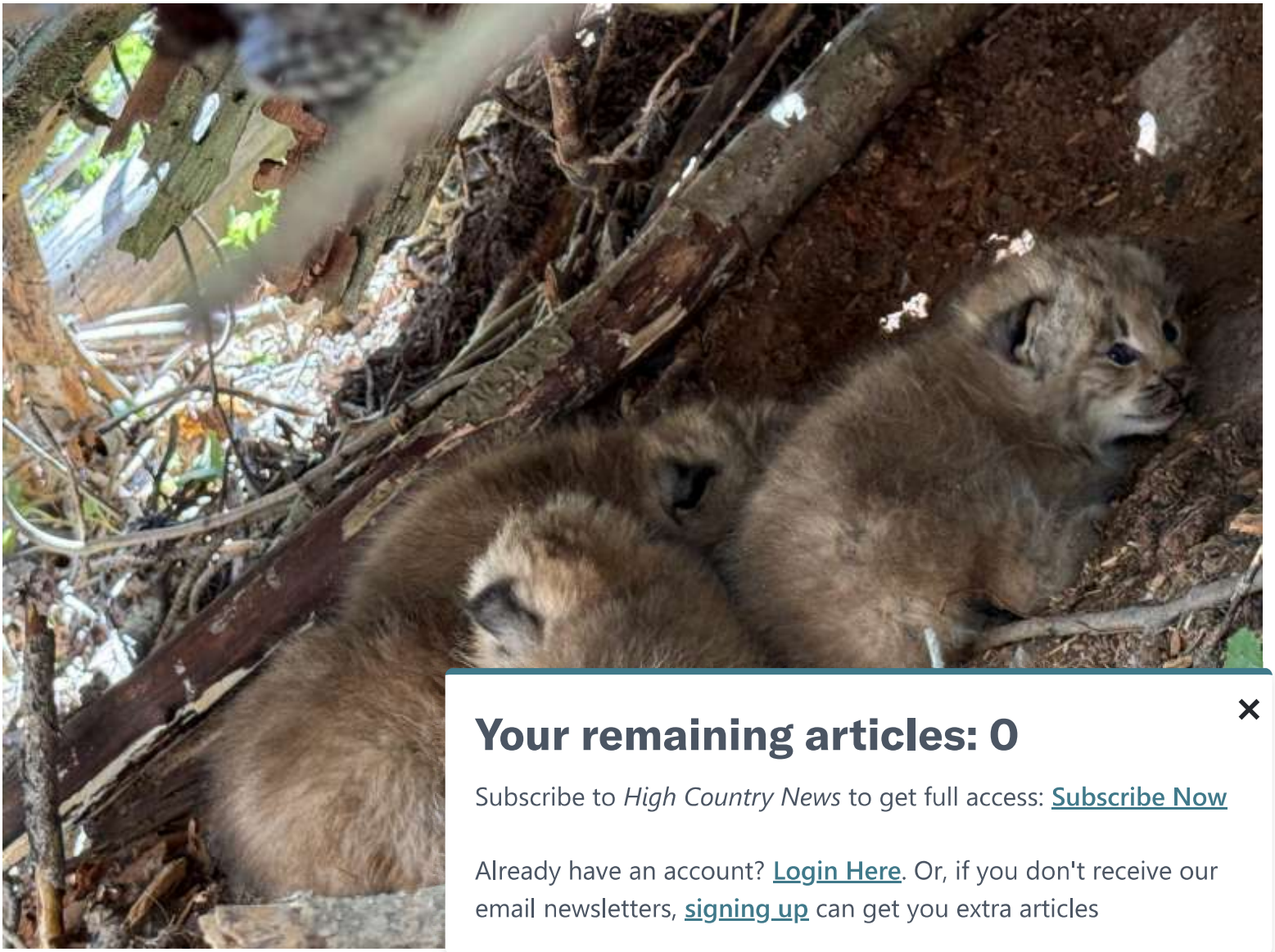

Early this June, scientists and conservation groups confirmed the first lynx kittens born in the Kettle Range, Washington.
Courtesy of Elizabeth Odell/Colville Tribes

After four years, the long-awaited signal arrived on the computer: Rose Piccinini, a wildlife biologist for the Colville Tribes, saw the telltale clusters of converging lines from GPS trackers that identified the dens of an elusive wild animal. Two weeks later, she and a team of five hiked through dense deadfall and clawing vegetation to reach their targets: two families of lynx kittens, the first confirmed litters born in the area in four decades.

The kittens are the fruit of a rewilding effort led by the Colville Tribes to restore Canada lynx in the Kettle River Mountain Range in northeastern Washington, after overtrapping had extirpated them in the 1980s. The plan was to **trap up to 50 lynxes** in British Columbia over five years and transplant them across the border. The kittens were "the culmination of years and years of work," Piccinini said.

But now, shifting federal policy might affect the lynx's future, along with that of the many other sensitive species that dwell in road-free areas in the country's forests. The same month, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Brooke L. Rollins announced the **rescission of a 2001 rule** that bars road construction and timber harvest on 58.5 million acres of Forest Service land. The grounds where the lynx kittens were born would be among those subject to the rule's repeal.

Still, some environmentalists remain optimistic that the Kettle Range lynx still has a chance. "It depends on if (federal officials) lifted the roadless rule, what they are going to do in the areas where the lift came off," said Cody Desautel, executive director of the Colville Tribes. Lightly used roads primarily for fire management would likely have little impact on the lynx's recovery, compared with clear-cutting or mining. What happens next, his team — and the lynx — will have to wait and see.

A Canada lynx is released by the Colville Tribes in 2023.
Courtesy of Colville Confederated Tribes Fish & Wildlife

GROWING AWARENESS OF the ecological importance of roadless areas was a major driving force behind the roadless rule's adoption in 2001. The road-free landscapes the Forest Service manages often encircle protected natural areas, forming the connective tissue between national parks and designated wilderness areas for wildlife to roam across the whole landscape. Roads and their construction can disturb these areas, potentially encouraging the foray of invasive species, polluting watersheds and threatening food sources for the animals that dwell within. In the case of the lynx, densely vegetated forests are a requirement for denning and breeding, as is the thick snowy ground cover that enables them to make good on their hunting specialty: skimming the surface to hunt snowshoe hares in winter.

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request for comment, a USDA spokesp
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Environmental advocates nationwide have decried the proposed rescission. “Rescinding the roadless rule opens the door to logging and development in some of the most ecologically important public forests we have,” William Ripple, an ecologist at Oregon State University, wrote in an email. “These areas are biodiversity strongholds and carbon sinks that play a vital role in climate resilience.”

The Carr Fire burned in Shasta and Trinity counties, California, in 2018. The official cause of the fire was a mechanical failure of a vehicle.
Eric Coulter/BLM

Research also challenges the notion that more roads means fewer and less intense wildland fires. Roads actually increase fire risk, with over 90% of all wildfires occurring within half a mile of a track. Contrary to the USDA’s argument that roads increase access for firefighters, a 2000 report showed that roads actually make little difference once a forest star

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Across the West, wildlife will be the first to feel the impacts of the roadless rule's removal. Many species are equally, if not more, vulnerable to development than the Canada lynx. For example, both the **Alexander Archipelago wolf** and the **Queen Charlotte goshawk** in Alaska's Tongass National Forest and the great gray owl in Oregon's Wallowa-Whitman are at-risk species that have a limited range. These forest dwellers are exquisitely adapted to the unique conditions of their homes for hunting or **nesting** — but that means their survival is yoked to that of the landscape. Lacking federal Endangered Species Act protections, these creatures must rely on the roadless rule as their main line of defense.

Perhaps the wildlife most vulnerable to roads is the grizzly bear. Grizzlies will often go out of their way — by as much as **two and a half miles** — to **avoid a paved road**. Roads inevitably hasten **human-bear encounters**, and **conflict** with humans is the main cause of grizzly bear deaths. Researchers estimate that ideal grizzly habitat should have less than one-third of a mile of pavement per square mile of forest.

A grizzly bear at the confluence of the Russian River and Kenai River in Chugach National Forest, Alaska.
U.S. Forest Service

In the 50 years since the passage of the Endangered Species Act, grizzly bear numbers have doubled to 2,000. Studies credit their rebound partly to the roadless nature of their key recovery areas: The rule protects a quarter of their territory in the Northern Rockies. At a time when Congress is weighing delisting grizzlies from the Endangered Species Act, the roadless rule would be critical for their survival.

Building more roads could affect wildlife in a variety of ways. Currently, the lack of roads helps keep recreation levels manageably low. Studies have shown that too many tourists, a frequent consequence of increased road access, can agitate the resident fauna and upset their natural routines. Mule deer, elk and pronghorn all skedaddle when humans
bald eagles in Alaska slept less and fed
birds spent more time guarding their ne

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proposal was first introduced in 2000, it received 1.6 million public comments, the highest for any rule in history, with over 90% of them in favor of it.

The rule has weathered many previous attempts to dismantle it. After President Bill Clinton signed it into law in January 2001, Wyoming and Idaho sued, and the George W. Bush administration later tried to replace it. The rule survived one final major assault **in 2012**, when the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals and U.S. Supreme Court rejected state requests challenging its legality.

After that, many policy experts regarded that chapter as largely closed. “But here we are,” said Timothy Preso, a managing attorney at the environmental nonprofit Earthjustice, who has worked on lawsuits involving the rule since 2000. “It feels like an unnecessary renewal of a controversy that had achieved some degree of finality.”

Nearly half of Forest Service lands have already opened their doors to mining and logging. Inventoried roadless areas make up 30% of forests and **less than 2% of the continental U.S.** land base. “It doesn’t seem like a huge ask to say, ‘Let’s leave some of these areas roadless,’ because we have roaded so much,” Preso said. Whatever happens with the roadless rule, it’s only the beginning for the Canada lynx in the Kettle Range. “Having the kittens is the first step,” Piccinini said. “Getting those kittens to survive is the next.”