

Old mines can lure people into deadly dangers

By Lindsay Whitehurst
Associated Press

EUREKA, Utah — Underneath the mountains and deserts of the U.S. West lie hundreds of thousands of abandoned mines, an underground world that can hold serious danger and unexpected wonder.

They are a legacy of the region's prospecting past, when almost anyone could dig a mine and then walk away, with little cleanup required, when it stopped producing.

In Utah alone, the state is trying to seal more than 10,000 open mines with cinderblocks and metal grates after people have died in rock falls and all-terrain-vehicle crashes and from poisonous air over the past three decades. Just this month in Arizona, a prospector broke his left leg and ankle after plunging to the bottom of an old mine shaft. He spent nearly three days there with no food or water fending off rattlesnakes before a friend heard his cries for help.

Still, not everyone wants to see the mines closed. For years, a dedicated subculture of explorers has been slipping underground to see tunnels lined with sparkling quartz, century-old rail cars and caverns that open in the earth like buried ballrooms.

"Nobody has walked the path you're walking for 100 years," said Jeremy MacLee, who uses old mining documents and high-tech safety equipment to find and explore forgotten holes, mostly in Utah.

He also lends his expertise to searches for missing people. That's how he got to know Bill Powell, who looked for his 18-year-old son, Riley, for months before the teenager and his girlfriend were found dead in a mine shaft outside the small town of Eureka.

The teens' families formed a close bond with MacLee and other volunteer searchers. Despite his painful memories, Bill Powell decided to see what draws his friend to those dark recesses deep in the desert.

"It's a whole different life. The underground life," said Powell, who has a gravelly voice, close-cropped gray beard and a quick smile.

On a recent day, he and MacLee joined a group of friends in front of a mountainside opening near Eureka, wearing helmets, oxygen meters and strong lights, and a carrying stash of extra batteries. Cool air blasted from the opening, cutting through the desert heat.

The group walked between metal tracks that once carried ore carts, making their way through a tunnel shored up in places with squared-off timbers. After nearly a mile, the railcar tracks suddenly dropped into an abyss as the tunnel opened wide into a huge cavern. A hundred years ago, it would be a bustling scene lit with candles and carbide lights, as miners climbed a scaffolding the size of a seven-story building to drill out lead and silver.

Now, it is silent and pitch-black, illuminated only by the searching headlamp beams.

Bill Powell thought of his son, and the trips they took through the desert when he was a kid. Sometimes they'd come across an old mine shaft and toss a rock down, trying to imagine how far it fell. He doesn't do that anymore, not since his son's body was found in one of those pits.

Though the teenager never got to explore a mine like the one his father was in, Bill Powell thought he'd like seeing it. "He'd probably wish he was with me, hanging out."

But the dangers of abandoned mines weigh on Utah officials' minds. There have been 11 deaths since 1982 and more than 40 injuries, including people who entered mines to explore and others who fell in by accident, according to state data. Some abandoned mines become filled with tainted water, as in the toxic 2015 spill from Colorado's Gold King mine, but most in Utah are dry.

Legally, entering a mine can be considered trespassing in Utah if it has been closed or there are signs posted outside, but prosecutions are rare. Explorers argue it's no more dangerous than outdoor sports ranging from hiking to skiing, which also claim lives in the West.

But there are hazards specific to mines that can be especially dangerous to the unprepared, from abandoned explosives to the potentially fatal low-oxygen air known to miners as "black damp," reclamation specialist Chris Rohrer said. And while some explorers like MacLee go in prepared, many do not.

"It's just a wide open, Wild West thing," he said. "It's a completely uncontrolled situation."

In Arizona, prospector John Waddell fell to the rocky bottom of a mine shaft after the rigging he used to lower himself broke Oct. 15. He survived by sucking moisture out of his shirt before a friend who he'd told about his plans came to check on him.

There are also cases like Riley Powell and his girlfriend, Brellyne "Breezy" Otteson. Prosecutors say an enraged man killed the teenage couple after they visited his girlfriend despite his warning her not to have male visitors. He dumped their bodies in the mine shaft, where they remained for nearly three months before being discovered in March.

Similar cases have occurred in states like Wyoming, Colorado and California. Investigators also searched old mines in Utah and neighboring Nevada after the high-profile 2009 disappearance of Susan Cox Powell, though the 28-year-old Salt Lake City-area wife and mother was never found.

"Unfortunately, an abandoned mine is probably a good place to dispose of something like that — a person or something you want to hide forever," said Hollie Brown, spokeswoman for the Utah Division of Oil, Gas and Mining.

For the state, the message is as clear as its skull-and-crossbones signs: Stay out and stay alive. The program has been around more than 30 years, and the division has already sealed some 6,000 abandoned mines.

Heated lightweight tents cater to winter backpackers

By Brett French
Billings Gazette

I was looking forward to the rain as a buddy and I backpacked into the Custer Gallatin National Forest in south-central Montana to bowhunt in September. The drizzle would help quiet the crunchy-dry forest as we sneaked through the timber in search of wary elk.

Unfortunately, that soaking rain also saturated my pants, boots and socks as they brushed against the drenched grass and still-leafy bushes. Nothing feels much more uncomfortable, and chilling, than hiking around in wet clothing.

Luckily I was traveling with a hunting buddy who owns a lightweight backpacking shelter that has a compatible titanium wood stove. Before an evening hunt we picked out a campsite, and he set up the shelter and stove. Inside we piled up some small firewood. When we arrived back at camp at the end of shooting light, he quickly fired up the stove with a starter stick, and the pyramid-shaped tent steadily warmed.

By keeping the fire stoked, the stove and stovepipe were soon glowing orange-hot, and my gear slowly steamed dry while my body finally shook off the chill of a wet, cool fall day.

Hot tent intro

This was my introduction to hot-tent camping, an ever-growing fringe area of the outdoor market that's gaining attention from backcountry hunters, anglers and even winter campers.

"It's hard to go back to a cold dome tent" after camping in a stove-heated shelter, said Eric Bender, the lead designer for Kifaru International.

The Colorado-based company, founded by Patrick Smith in 1997, has been in the hot-tent business for a long time, but the past few years have seen an uptick in sales as more people look for wood stove warm-able shelters that are lightweight, Bender said.

That fame has been aided



Brett French / Billings Gazette

This pyramid-shaped shelter made by Seek Outside provided comfort on a frosty night on Beartooth Mountain in Montana.

"It's hard to go back to a cold dome tent."

— Eric Bender, lead designer, Kifaru International

by social media.

"Hunting has definitely blown up in popular culture and social media," Bender said. "Especially in places like Colorado and Montana where everybody knows someone who hunts."

As a result, Kifaru now has competition from the likes of Seek Outside, another Colorado-based business, and Luxe Hiking Gear in Forks, Washington. Foreign companies are also building similar heated tepees, including Nortent in Norway and Eldfell in Sweden. The size of the structures range from one-man shelters up to 24 people.

Seek Outside

My friend was packing Seek Outside's Cimarron ultralight pyramid tent (\$369). It utilizes only one 6-foot-tall four-piece carbon-fiber pole. With the stove set up it comfortably fits two backpackers, their gear and a pile of firewood. The 8.6-foot, by 9.6-foot shelter has no floor, so we brought tarps to spread across the ground and keep our sleeping pads dry.

A fireproof vent made of fiberglass, called a stove jack, allows the 7.5-foot titanium

stovepipe to poke outside without melting the lightweight tent fabric. The titanium stove set up in minutes, and its flat top allowed us to boil water without lighting up a canister gas stove, although the wait was a bit longer.

Although high in profile, the structure sheds wind incredibly well. A door on each side also made it easy to exit and enter without stepping over each other.

The tent alone weighs just less than 5 pounds. The Cub woodstove (\$239) is a marvel of engineering, collapsing flat and weighing in at 2 pounds, 11 ounces — a weight that includes the stovepipe. The combo outfit cost my friend \$825.

Winter camping

That's a steep price, but as Whitefish, Montana, extreme skier and snowmobiler Corey Seemann pointed out, it's hard to put a price on a lightweight, packable shelter that enables you and your pals to stay warm on a cold night or morning. Seemann is an ambassador for Seek Outside, testing out the gear on his winter backcountry trips. When it dropped to zero degrees outside the tent, it was 60 to 70 degrees inside with the fire roaring, he said.

"The lightweight aspect of what they're doing is genius," he said.

Other friends have heavier

canvas tents that can provide a similar hot spot for winter camping. But those have to be packed on a sled and driven in. If a snowmobile broke down, Seemann said a Seek Outside tent could fit in a backpack so a winter camper could safely ski or snowshoe out for help.

"It can be used as a lifeline," he said.

Bender, of Kifaru, noted that his company has sold stoves and shelters to search and rescue groups for use in the backcountry. His company also makes backpacks and other gear, most of it with hunters in mind.

"We can pretty much fully outfit you except for the food, weapon and the knowledge," he said.

Take note

As Seek Outside notes on its website, the smaller stoves need constant tending to keep a fire going, since the fuel is little. So if the temperature is likely to drop to zero, you still want a zero-degree sleeping bag to stay comfortable after you fall asleep and the fire goes out.

And unless you're willing to stay up all night and stoke the fire, it will go out. So don't think of the shelters as continually hot. Instead, look at them as a way to dry out wet clothes, bake off a chill and maybe heat up water for a freeze-dried meal.

Wolves kill 4th Klamath calf

KLAMATH FALLS (AP) — Wildlife officials say wolves killed a calf in southern Oregon, marking the fourth kill by the Rogue Pack in the Fort Klamath area.

The Herald and News reports state Department of Fish and Wildlife officials confirmed Tuesday that the dead calf found Friday on ranch lands in Wood River Valley was killed by wolves.

Three other dead calves were found over a three-day period last week.

Department wildlife biologist Tom Collum says personnel are taking turns camping in a field near the ranch, and they are using non-lethal methods to deter wolves, including sirens, bonfires, strobe lights and cracker shells.

Officials are also checking remote cameras daily to track movement. They have set up traps to capture wolves, so they can place tracking collars.

BIKE TOUR

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Cyclists should practice soft pedaling down each undulation and bench-marking how far up the next rise they can get before reaching their lowest gear. The stark beauty of this area is best enjoyed almost any time of the year except mid to late August.

Eventually slide victoriously onto Emigrant Road and into Mission. Just past the Wetland Community Park, around mile 50, turn south onto Confederate Way next to the Nixyaawii School.

Take the bicycle and pedestrian path

that leaves Confederate Way and weaves past the golfing green and to the casino complex for the last incline of the day. You will know you are on the right path by a sign warning hapless walkers what to do if faced with a cougar.

Top out and enjoy the view into Pendleton, Mission, the Blue Mountains and the loess prairie. Cycle past the Tamastlikt Cultural Institute and into the Wildhorse RV Park. Settle in to recover from day two of the Herculean Tour and enjoy a number of amenities that include a swimming pool, showers, laundry, tepees for rent and a shuttle to the casino.

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