Get Wild: Devastation from fire, insects and humans leads to forest diversity and resiliency

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Zach Kauk
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Ptarmigan Trail is pictured in November after the Ptarmigan Fire in late September.
Zach Kauk/Courtesy photo

On Sept. 27, Summit County watched nervously as the Ptarmigan Fire began to spread above homes nestled in the foothills of Ptarmigan Peak. As firefighting crews rose to the challenge, those of us on the west side of the valley watched in awe as the air attack began dumping water and fire retardant while those on the east side evacuated and prayed that their homes would be spared.

No matter where you live or work in Summit County, you are in a wildland-urban interface where human terraforming and construction intersect with national forests. Because of this, what happens in the forest matters to you in a very personal way.

On Nov. 9, I hiked the popular Ptarmigan Trail from the trailhead near Interstate 70 to what locals refer to as “the bench,” which consists of a large log resting on two smaller logs. This is a great overlook point for Silverthorne, Dillon Reservoir and the Gore Range.

About a half-mile before the bench, the trail begins meandering through multiple burn scars from the Ptarmigan Fire, which ignited in late September. I was pleased that firefighters practiced Leave No Trace, leaving little evidence of their work except for cut logs, sawdust and the amber-colored retardant on aspens that weathered the fire due to their high moisture content.

Whenever I hike through an area destroyed by fire, ravaged by insects or thinned by humans, I am initially saddened by the devastation, but my outlook brightens when I take a closer look.

Amid the burned pine trees are aspens that still thrive. Their root system is now expanding in the burned areas, and green shoots will soon appear and reach for the sun. In the fallen lodgepole pine ravaged by the mountain pine beetle, a squirrel has made a home. Birds peck at beetles in still-standing trees while an eagle soars above the newly opened forest looking for prey.

Long before humans entered the forest, natural thinning by fire and insects occurred. This natural thinning is how the forest evolves to changes in the environment. Water plays a big role. When the forest becomes too dense for the available water, then trees and other vegetation become more susceptible to fire, insects and diseases. This devastation occurs as part of the natural cycle.

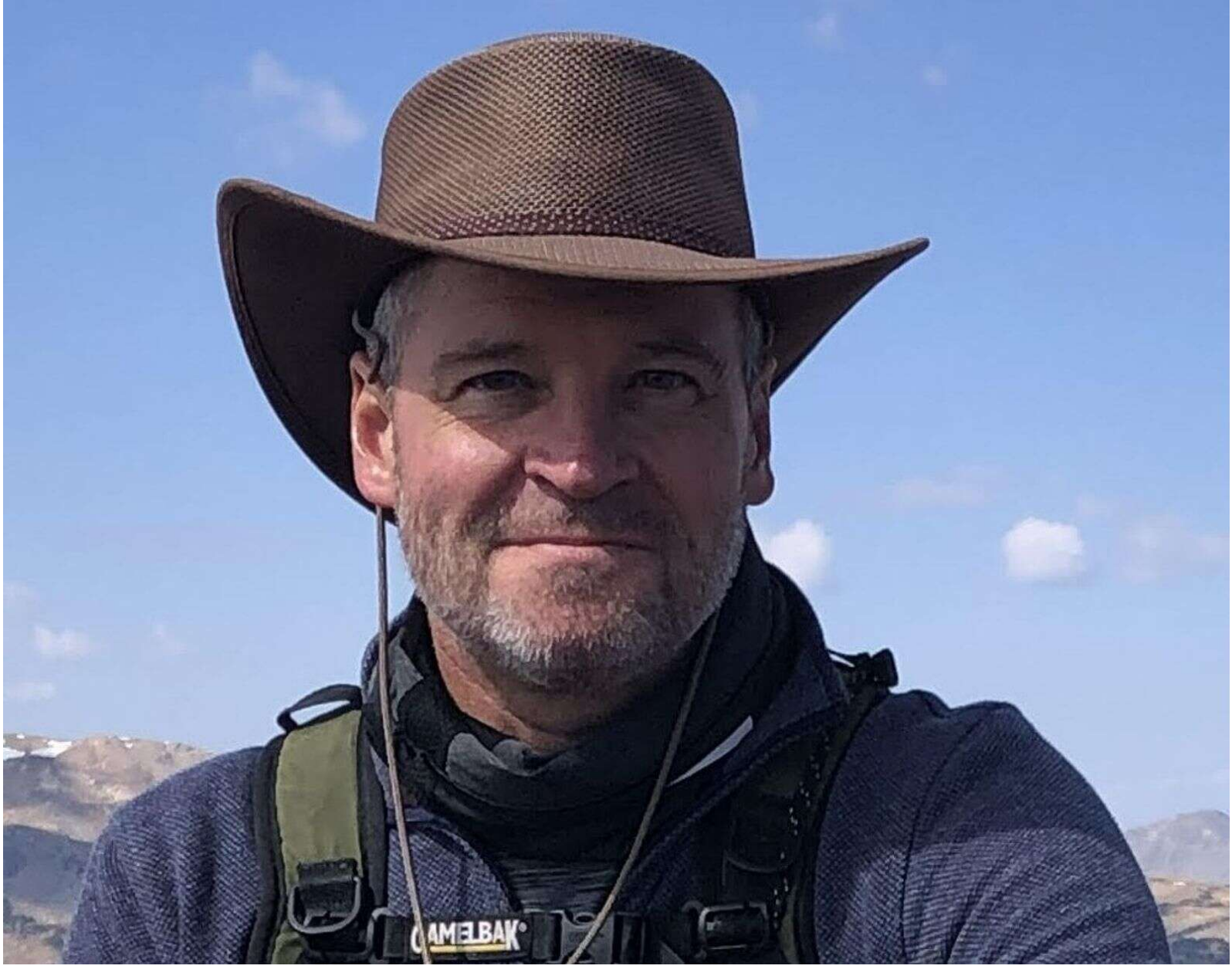
Once vegetation is destroyed, natural selection can result in different species thriving in that area. A meadow might appear where a stand of trees previously took root. An aspen grove might replace lodgepole pine or vice versa. Over a longer period, multiple cycles of devastation and renewal will occur, and different species will become dominant in the area.

From a practical perspective, we want our homes protected from the devastation. That's why we fight fires near the wildland-urban interface and why the U.S. Forest Service practices mechanical thinning as well as prescribed and managed fire to thin the forest in these areas.

When you see notices of a prescribed burn or mechanical thinning, that is the Forest Service working to keep the forest healthy and our homes protected. Although the smoke from these fires might be irritating, it is preferable to the inevitable forest fire that would occur without intentional thinning.

Next time you walk through the forest and see an area that has been devastated by fire, insects or thinning, think not of the devastation but of the wonder that nature will put in its place.

You can learn more about how the Forest Service manages the land at FS.USDA.gov/managing-land.



Zach Kauk

> “Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Zach Kauk is a volunteer for Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit counties. For more information, visit EagleSummitWilderness.org.