

**Grizzly Times Podcast
Transcript
Episode 47
Bruce Gordon
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Louisa Willcox: This is Louisa Willcox with Grizzly Times, and I'm delighted to be here today with my friend Bruce Gordon. Bruce is a veteran pilot who has spent decades offering journalists, decisionmakers and citizens a birds' eye view of threatened landscapes across the West. Since the 1980s, I have worked with Bruce on a host of campaigns to elevate the profile of special places -- and I've seen the transformative impact that seeing the big picture can make.

In one of my early experiences, Mike Sullivan, then governor of Wyoming, was inspired to protect the Clarks Fork of the Yellowstone River from being dammed after a single flight with Bruce. And Bruce played a key role in a campaign that stopped a huge Canadian corporation from digging a massive gold mine on the doorstep of Yellowstone Park. So many politicians and reporters wanted to see what was at stake that Bruce took on the role of guide as well as pilot to free up a seat in his plane that would otherwise have been taken up by me or another local activist.

Bruce was also critical to an ambitious project that involved flying all 22 mountain ranges in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem in a single summer to assess the health of the whitebark pine forests. This was the first-ever study of how climate change was impacting this keystone tree species. The findings played a key role in litigation to protect Yellowstone grizzlies that depend on whitebark pine seeds for food. And they recently helped get the tree protected under the Endangered Species Act.

I'm delighted to visit today with Bruce about his journey flying for conservation.

Bruce: Well, it's a pleasure Louisa. It's been amazing after seeing you up in Livingston when I landed to do some flights up there over the Crazies, we got to reconnect and we've been chatting. And what a flood of wonderful memories come back -- things you sort of forget about as you're moving on to the next issue or experience. And to think back on those wonderful days with you are really terrific, so thanks for the opportunity to chat with you too.

L: Yes, it's an honor. So, Bruce, you were born in Chicago and raised in Brooklyn. So how did you go from being a city kid in the East and Midwest to flying for conservation in the West?

B: Yeah, that's a good question you posed to me, and I have to reflect. Well, I used to be pretty good at stoop ball and stick ball in the city, and I ended up going to college and changing everything I was doing. I was in upstate New York. I didn't give much thought

to it at that time, but upstate New York was for me a pretty wild place. And I think it somehow imbibed in me a real appreciation for nature. Something that was a lot different than stick ball for sure.

So I don't know -- it was just sort of a fortuitous path that took me after the Service -- I got drafted during the Vietnam conflict and ended up after the Service doing a short stint working in Wall Street for about six months. I said: "Boy I can't deal with this, I want to go West." And something just sort of lured me out there. And I got involved in being in the mountains and climbing and doing all kinds of wonderful things in the mountains -- and being a ski bum. But that didn't last long.

I needed to do something else. So I got the VA bill to teach me to fly and I learned to fly - I'd been on mountain rescues so I was going to combine flying with the mountains. And I was about to head off to Alaska to do flying for mountain rescue kind of issues, when I met a guy named Michael Stewart, and we teamed up to do what we ended up calling Conservation Flying.

L: Yes, you founded Ecoflight with your friend the musician John Denver in 2002, but you had done conservation flying decades before that. In my estimation all told, you've been flying to save special places for over 40 years. So Bruce, what is it about getting people up in a plane that is so transformative?

B: I learned that early on, that for me combining my love of nature and volunteering with local schools and education, that getting people in an airplane and showing them places that they've never seen before in a way that they've never seen in before, was, as you said, transformative.

People are sitting in that airplane and, for the most part, people are a little nervous -- or even if they're not nervous, their senses are heightened. So they're thinking about what's going on, they're looking. And then by being able to explain what's going on to people -- seeing how our ecosystems, our watersheds, how they all connected -- and trying to get people to understand not just the beauty that they are seeing, but also some of the concerns and problems.

And we started combining that with some ground tours, and these aerial educational tours were born. And it was a way for people to get the big picture, try to understand what's really going on. And it was very good way to communicate because people were listening when you were saying something. I certainly am not an expert on any of these issues or many of these issues, but I certainly know a little bit, and I can steer people in the right direction.

For me, it's all about education. And these days I'm saying that I don't want people looking out the left side of the window, and I don't want them looking out the right side

of the window. I want them looking at the earth, at the ground, thinking about what they care about, and then advocating for what they care about.

L: Well, it is a transformative process being up in a plane with you -- and I think I only threw up in your plane once, hopefully.

B: I remember that.

L: Oh do ya.

B: There was a campaign -- we were doing oil and gas down here in Colorado over the Piceance basin. And we flew everybody, every county commissioner, every mayor, everybody. And there was one lady, her name was Claire Bastable, and she sort of reminded me of you. She was brilliant, and she could really express herself so well -- and she hated flying. I mean she couldn't stand it. But as so many people who've been up in the air who know the land and act as guides sometimes, they get up in the air and they get air sick, they get sick -- and they never stop explaining and informing and educating the people. So yeah, it was pretty funny.

And again, I was talking about how just being in the confines of the airplane -- and its exciting and its beautiful, and sometimes it's fearful. But there were times also when you get people up and they have these transformative experiences. And maybe because of the airplane, but mostly because of the landscape.

So, years ago I was working on clearcutting -- and people would go up [with me] who were loggers. And the issue of course was always "jobs versus conserving the landscape." And sometimes the loggers would say: "Oh my god, I had no idea that so much of this land had been clearcut." And it really opened their eyes, and it changed them in a transformative way.

Same with these oil wells that I was referring to with Claire. People would say: "Oh yeah there are some wells." But then you take a look at the wells, and the wells are right next to the river, right next to the watersheds and in the heart of the watersheds. And the people who are really wanting to drill more would say: "Well wait a minute, maybe I need to pull back a little bit and be a little more conservative and conservation oriented."

L: I can speak to that with what happened with whitebark pine, thanks to you being in Jackson [Wyoming] that day. We were having an educational program about the impacts to whitebark pine from climate change and mountain pine beetles, and after this program, we got the Forest Service District Ranger up in the air. She knew that whitebark pine were dying as a result of this unprecedented beetle outbreak, but she had never seen the scale of it. And you got her up in the air. And she got down on the

ground and she said: "I'm in, we are going to assess the ecosystem in terms of whitebark pine damage."

And thankfully you had the time to do the overflights. But we couldn't have done that project, that whole analysis of the ecosystem-wide whitebark pine loss, if it hadn't been for your flight with Liz Davy, the Forest Service District Ranger who was astonished at what was going on the landscape.

So it was similar to the loggers you flew -- people interested in oil and gas development -- flying really changes your understanding of what is happening. It's an amazing --

B: I remember that meeting and flying into Jackson, and going up -- and you had put this incredible meeting together that was so informative. Then Janey -- and I don't know if you remember this -- Janey and I were then flying home, and we looked over and we saw a patch of red trees, way over there. And Janey took some incredible pictures, and then we sent it to some of your colleagues, and we spent an awful lot of time trying to remember where they were. And it was one of the first really documented outbreaks that was so horrendous up there. And that picture went on to be sort of poster child for a lot of that work we did.

L: Well that photograph that your partner Jane Pargiter took went around and around the Forest Service and the conservation world before a Forest Service person figured out where that sea of red -- those whitebark pine in the process of dying -- where that sea of red was, which is on the Bridger Teton Forest. But yes, it was this iconic photograph that was used throughout the campaign to show what was going on, that these forests are dying. You couldn't get that perspective from the ground. So thank you and thank Jane for all of that contribution to changing peoples' minds from seeing --

B: She's quite a photographer, so it's great when she's on board. She's also a pilot. My wife Jane Pargiter is from South Africa. We'll talk about it a little while, but some of the ideas she's coming up with and the educational aspects of what we're doing are still as exciting as ever.

L: So, along these lines, Bruce, you've flown with hundreds of environmental groups and in hundreds of places, from the little ones like the Yaak Valley Forest Council in Montana to the big ones like Sierra Club and Natural Resources Defense Council -- you've flown for everybody. Is there a campaign that stands out as just particularly meaningful, or a story that you've carried with you?

B: Well, that's a tough question because there's been so many. And probably starting with the one when it was working with you -- and I always remembered the annual meetings of Greater Yellowstone Coalition, and you were running them. And that was about the time with the New World Mine was going on, and I was flying everybody. And really for the first time, I realized that you could fly so many different people and they

all have an impact, from the press, political decisionmakers, the media representatives, the concerned citizens, you name it.

We would fly everybody out of that little strip in Gardiner. And it was challenging flying, it was exciting and fun. But the proximity of Yellowstone to that area made for a very compelling overview. And winning the campaign was very exciting, and of course gives extra emphasis to it.

But most recently, we were working very diligently on the Bears Ears, which is a monument for Native Americans in southern Utah. And unfortunately, the Trump administration sort of changed things there, and we're hoping we're going to reconfigure that monument again.

But the work was great for us, because I've been a member of the climbing community, and we could really help organize people in the climbing community. And Janey has really good connections with a lot of the Tribes there, so we were really involved in that campaign right from the get-go.

And of course, it was devastating when the Trump administration rolled it back, but it was groundbreaking to have a first Native American monument. And it was very exciting, and we think it will be reestablished in its full capacity in the near future.

When you talk about campaigns, a couple more come to mind. Working over on the Snake River with dam removal, again with the Tribes up in Oregon and Idaho in places where the Tribes are working on getting those dams down. And again, what makes them memorable is when you win them. So it makes you feel very good about that. And we certainly do fly everywhere.

And working to secure the Desert Protection Act also was a very meaningful campaign. Working with so many different organizations, so many people that are really committed to positive change -- and just the most wonderful characters that I first started meeting back in those GYC Yellowstone days. So, all those things pretty much stem from those beginnings when we were first starting to do conservation flying, and up to now when we're out there working with the Tribal issues. And campaigns just around here in Aspen, Colorado, where we finally retired a whole bunch of oil and bunch leases. I ended up flying Governor Hickenlooper and Senator Udall and Senator Bennet -- and you name every one of the county commissioners around here.

So these campaigns start off on the grassroots level and they end up really gaining momentum. And the images we can bring back, and the advocacy we can propose from getting that view of the terrain and how it affects everybody, is very fulfilling. What's interesting about what I do, or exciting for me and challenging, is that not only are you dealing with the issues of conservation and the pros and cons of different landscapes or what to do about them, but then there's the flying aspect of it that you're interested in.

And you asked about a particular incident. There's no real particular one, but in reflection, nowadays if I'm flying into Jackson Hole, or a place like that, almost each airport has a weather reporting station. And back in the old days we did not have that.

So you would maybe go from a place coming up from the Green River Valley up into Jackson, and Jackson was reporting clear. And you would start up the valley over Hoback Junction and all the sudden you go: "Man, this is not even close to clear." And that was one of the first times I realized some of these limitations of the new technology coming out -- or no technology available for you.

So flying really had some difficulty. It made the difficulty of an airplane, on that day at Hoback Junction, made me say: "Boy I can't rely on this, and at any moment things can change. And I better keep doing my homework and keep doing the training as much as I can, because weather is unpredictable. And even though 20 miles away it's clear, it sure ain't right now, and this is mountain flying."

And this was many many years ago and you learn your lessons from that. But that stood out for me when you asked about a particular incident. And I remember cruising up there feeling real good about the weather improving, and everything's going to be great. And all the sudden I'm really concerned, and having to go to Plan B and plan C.

L: In hearing you talk about flying across the West, I also am thinking about your flying on several continents where the hazards really weren't just the weather, such as when you were down in Nicaragua documenting illegal logging. And then you were part of this crazy project called the Mega Transect that involved surveying 2,000 miles of country in the Congo basin with the renowned explorer and ecologist Michael Fay -- so that was another level of challenge I would assume. And were there times you weren't sure you were going to get out of there?

B: Sometimes I'm challenged to get out of the house here. I wonder about that. But yeah, I mean all that stuff goes into your mind for sure. And yeah, it's really cool to listen to these questions because it brings back a flood of memories. I said: "God yeah, I used to do that." And nowadays I say: "How the hell did I do that?" But by the good grace of God go I, that's for sure. I'm just a really lucky guy in many ways -- and you do your homework, and you do your best, and you pay your money and you take your chances sometimes.

But yeah, those places you just mentioned, whether it was in the Central or South America or going across the Atlantic. I took a 206 across the Atlantic Ocean to get the plane over there to help support that crazy guy. I mean, I thought I was being crazy going across the Atlantic, but then I realized what he was doing walking across the Congo. And so the plane was used in support. And we didn't do a lot for that, but it was there. And I really admired people like Michael Fay who take on these huge challenges.

But there was a time I was down in Ecuador, and they were cutting these demarcation lines, because there was a huge calling for oil and gas. And the Indigenous people were up in arms over there. In fact, at one time there was a terrible mistake -- the Indigenous people really hated the Conoco people, and a priest was coming in on a Conoco helicopter to help make the peace and stuff with the Indigenous people. They thought he was a Conoco representative and ended up killing him.

So tempers were high working on the landscapes way down there. So, you say: "God, what am I getting myself involved in? This is pretty intense stuff. People are really concerned."

And then on a local front, what comes to mind -- makes me laugh almost -- was when I was doing a lot of flying for wolf reintroduction. And I was working with Diane Boyd up in the Flathead. And this was when I was first going up there. And so I'm going up with this biologist who says he's been there before. I said: "Well I've never landed on this strip."

Diane had a little cabin on a dirt strip, and she was doing this remarkable research to bring in the wolf, because the wolf was coming across the Canadian border on its own. But the people were talking about reintroduction and the pros and cons of that.

And anyway, we were flying along, and I said: "You know, I don't know where this strip is. Are you sure you know where it is?" And he says: "Oh yeah, it's this little place and I've been in there a couple times, and I know what it is."

So, we're flying along and I'm trusting this guy, which was mistake number one and then number two and number three. So I say: "Well on the map, it looks like it's about here." And he said: "No, it's over here, I'm sure it is."

So, I see a clearing and I said: "Well are you sure?" He goes: "Yep, yep, positive. No problem." So I circle around -- there was nothing on the map -- and I judged it. I said: "Boy that's pretty short, I don't know." He said: "No, positive, and this other guy flew in." And I said: "Well if that guy flew in there, I can fly in there."

So I come and I make an approach, and I think it's a good approach. And I go: "No way, I'm not getting in there." I go around again, and the guy is really upset now. He says: "Look you should be able to fly in there."

Anyway, I come in, and I make this really great approach and I land, and I come screeching to a halt at the edge of the tree line with a little creek beyond it. And I taxi back. And the guy goes: "Huh, this sure doesn't look like the place -- oh I got the wrong place."

And so here I am on this real little strip in the heat of the day. And I go: "Boy, I'm sort of stuck."

And a guy drives by in a truck, and he says: "What the hell are you doing here?" And I said: "Well we thought it was this air strip." And he goes: "Well I ain't seen somebody fly in on this strip since 1958." I said: "Well great – and what am I going to do now. I'm in the middle of grizzly bear, wolf country. I got an airplane, that's all I got."

And we spent the whole day clearing and cutting. We cut down some big trees and waited until real late at night and it was real cold, so the density altitude was OK. And we got out of there -- and about a half a mile away was Diane's place.

L: Well, speaking of planes, you've spent so much time in the cockpit, and you have to know all the quirks of the different planes in such intimate detail. Do they have personalities to you? Do you give them names and if so, do you have a favorite plane?

B: Well, my favorite plane is the one I still operate, that just got a new engine -- and the thing is like brand new. It's a Cessna 210, it can go 200 miles an hour and it gets you from one place to another, including to Central America reasonably. And you can also fly 75 miles an hour -- I fly it for mountain rescue up here, right on the edge. So it can go slow and fast.

And there are so many planes we used to operate. When it first started it was a Twin Otter, one of those high-winged airplanes with the big wheels that could land on dirt strips. But it was really expensive to operate.

But naming airplanes, I guess many years ago somebody gave us a generous donation, so we put a nickname on the airplane. But I usually just refer to mine as 1 X-Ray Echo, which is sort of catchy. It's a wonderful airplane.

L: So Bruce, you were close friends with John Denver, with whom you've shared a love of airplanes, and the mountains in the West, and saving special places. So what made your relationship with John so special? And if he were alive today, are there some thing you'd like to talk about?

B: When you just said that, the first thing that comes to my mind was -- years ago we'd be sitting around and we were talking about John getting into politics, and he says: "Well I can make more of a difference not being in politics." And I just thought of politics because if he was around today and saw what just happened with our country and at the Capitol building, the guy would have gone crazy. Because he was a guy who really cared. He cared about so many things.

And we really connected years ago when I was climbing the Himalayas and he was a big supporter of mine. We would end up taking these long walks in Aspen or these different

places around the world. I was one of the people that would travel with him once in a while who did not work for him, so we shared a lot of time in special places.

One time in Mexico came to mind when you asked this question. We were just sitting out in the moonlight. Just sitting out in the ocean, just hanging, and the waves are coming in. And we're looking at the moon and talking about the planet. And I don't know if many people know this, but John was very involved with NASA. He was a big supporter of NASA.

And one special memory for me was taking off in his Lear jet on his way down to Johnson Space Center, because he was going to take a look and talk to Goldman -- I think that was his name -- the director of NASA. Because John wanted to go into space and in fact, he was close to getting that honor. And the flight that they were talking about him going on was the one, unfortunately, with Christy McCauley, that blew up.

So John went over there and I watched them do all these things with the astronauts. And it was really a heady time for me.

But we shared a love flying, of the mountains and the spirit of the mountains that was so well reflected in his music. And he had a sense of adventure, that guy. Coming back from a concert tour in Japan one time, we had a crazy old friend that would take us to these waterfalls on Maui. And then that friend could dive, he went up about 40 feet and did this dive into this pool. And next thing I know, old JD is walking up the same path, and he jumps off this thing -- and does this incredible swan dive. And I guess he was quite a diver in his youth -- but there was another aspect to this guy that I'd never seen before. But to me, it was his care about the earth and his care about the planet.

And his proposal to NASA was: "You get me up into space and I'll do a show." He really thought they could pay for some of this stuff, and he could beam down his music and sentiments down to the Earth, and then beam them out into the cosmos. So, he was a dreamer, there was no doubt he was a dreamer.

But on the other side, he was a practical guy. We actually used his Lear jet to take the premier of Canada up in British Columbia and a whole gaggle of press and people like that over the Pacific Northwest, when the spotted owl conflict was happening. So first he did a concert tour up in Canada -- not a tour, a concert evening, because we had worked on the Tatshenshini [a terrible mine proposal on the Tashenshini River in British Columbia], if you remember that. We had done some flying up there in the Tatshenshini, and he was helping with a fundraiser.

And then I talked him into getting these dignitaries and flying over the Pacific Northwest. And so there we are in his Lear jet with all his flaps out, flying at minimum speed with all these characters. And he's flying the plane and showing the clearcuts and

all those other visuals that you see on that issue many many years ago. But he was a wonderful man, just a regular, wonderful character.

L: Yeah, and he was so inspired with the notion that educating people across the country is important if we have any hope for conservation. And along those lines, he had this vision of a "Flight Across America," which sounds like you've taken up as part of your work in Colorado with Jane, involving students. Maybe you could talk a bit about that.

B: Yeah, at Ecoflight we do a program called "Flight Across America," in the name of John Denver. And Jane was so influential in getting this program off the ground. After a whole summer of flying almost every day, then we direct our attentions to young adults.

John and I on the golf course once came up with this idea that we were going to fly an airplane from Alaska to Washington D.C., on the Earth Day 2000. And along the way, we were going to recruit different celebrity pilots to fly from place to place, and then hold an evening of education, fundraising, a dog and pony show. And we were starting conversation with John Travolta, with Tom Cruise, with Harrison Ford, and we were trying to see if this made sense. And the idea was to end the flights in Washington D.C. on Earth Day. So it was just in the beginning of planning and talking and everything else - and then John, unfortunately, met his demise, way too soon.

And I kept thinking: "Well, I'll keep doing this maybe in his memory." But nobody returned my calls. They returned John's in a second, but not mine. And so we went on.

And I said: "How can I honor his memory?" And so, I created a program where we would fly young adults over these different issues and have experts in conservation speak to them. And a lot of times it would culminate in these big meetings in the towns whether it was Aspen or not. We'd have people from the whole Roaring Fork Valley come up, and we'd do presentations with the people who went on this Flight Across America. And some nights, we'd have three airplanes, four airplanes filled with young adults, and go from place to place.

And we would end up having these big presentations at the end of them, and it was very exciting. We'd have speakers like Peter McBride from National Geographic -- and we'd have all kinds of experts come and talk to the community. So we're not only reaching the participants, we were tasking the participants, the young adults, to then go out and write editorials in their hometown papers and make their own presentations to more people. So we were reaching a lot of people.

And it was very exciting because a lot of people went on to become leaders in the environmental movement, people that we had flown from Montana and people down from rural places in Arizona too, so it was around the country. We keep doing a facsimile of this program, and I feel very strongly that it's an important program.

And it also started when I flew Speaker Foley [Tom Foley was the Speaker of the House of Representatives from 1989-1995] many years ago. And House Speaker Foley fell asleep. I said: "I can't just keep flying these politicians, because they're politicians. Period."

So I was looking for inspiration. And it's an inspiration for us to fly these kids. And there's a process to get accepted. And they have to produce articles and other things. So it's a pretty good outreach and it makes us feel really good -- and Janey's been incredible leading that charge.

L: Well thank you. If there is a future, it is in the kids you're taking up in the air and involving in these programs. I mean if they undertake in a motivated way saving this planet, we will have a hope -- so thanks for that.

You mentioned climbing a bit ago, Bruce. And I remember over the years that when we would get together, we'd often talk about climbing and mountaineering, because it's a shared interest. I'm not at your level by any stretch. But what do you think Bruce are shared aspects of flying and climbing? I mean are they similar or different for you? Because you mention them back and forth, your interest in climbing, your interest in flying.

B: Yeah, I think they are very similar. Years ago, when I would teach climbing, the best thing about it was you have someone belaying someone, and there is a commitment about the rope, and there's a camaraderie. But it all comes from an awareness, thinking about the other person, so that involves other people.

Whereas flying, you may not be involving other people or relying on other people, so that's a difference -- you're relying on yourself in many instances -- but it's an awareness. It opens up your consciousness. You have to be thinking about so many different aspects, weather is always an aspect, how are you feeling personally, what do you need to know technically. Sometimes with airplanes there's a little more that you have to think about. And you need a backup plan.

But I think the most important thinking is an awareness. And it's a self-awareness that is common denominator -- where you're at, what are your capabilities, what are my intentions. And decisionmaking -- decisionmaking is really important. Many years ago, you probably remember this, you were involved with the National Outdoor Leadership School, but it was the five Ps that they teach: Prior Planning Prevents Piss Poor Performance. And that to me is another similarity with climbing and with flying. But again, mindfulness and the awareness of who you are, where you are, what you're going to do here, is a common denominator.

L: Listening to you talk about climbing and flying in that way it reminds me about what it's like to be in grizzly bear habitat, where you have to be completely present, you can't be distracted or on your iphone or what have you. You have to be listening to the crack of a twig, the site of ravens that might signal a carcass, you can't be somewhere else. And I think that those experiences give us something closer to maybe our original self -- that we can be present. We don't have to be distracted on social media, and we may be wiser for it actually.

B: Well that's what I was trying to say. That's so beautifully said though. Being our original self and your senses are heightened by those experiences.

L: Well, you mentioned Aspen a few times where you've lived since the 1970s. And I know you've seen dramatic changes in the human landscape -- all of us have who've lived in the West for any length of time. But you've also had a birds' eye view of the changes. How have the changes affected you?

B: Well, they've galvanized me for many many years, as I see things that are changing that I don't feel are what I would like. But I recognize that what I would like is not certainly what everyone would like.

But that's been part of my job: to put these changes out in front of people and say: "Is this what you want? Is this what you do not want?"

Here in Aspen, it's amazing how when I drive down the streets -- now even with the pandemic, people are still here, it's busy, it's crowded, the buildings are busier. But what bothers me the most is when people come here and especially this last year or so, they've come here in droves and relocated here -- and are changing the school board and different aspects of little faster than I would like to see. And that's just my own personal opinion of course. But what I see them doing is instead of inhaling where they are, they're exhaling where they've been.

And I find those changes are not why I came here. And it's just happened a little too fast -- a little too many people. And I think we see that all over our country.

But as far as the environment's concerned, the air when I used to fly in southern Utah was crystal clear blue, and it's just not like that anymore. The untrammelled backcountry all the sudden has a mining claim in the middle of it, or some other area that people have some exclusions or are building some project there. And Lake Powell -- this is of course about climate change and people taking more water all the time -- but the bathtub rings on Lake Powell are really discernable.

And just as incredible is the red dust. There's a red dust phenomenon that's going on in the wintertime here, where all of the changes in Utah and the drilling and the mining etc, are creating vast dust bowl situations. And the wind blows from the West and all

the sudden you find layers of red dust up here in mountains which is greatly increasing the spring runoffs, changing the timing of the runoff, and increasing avalanche hazards. So does that have to do just with people? You could make an argument that it does, but there's been a lot of changes like that.

And just looking at the pollution, we have some incredible images of Shiprock, this incredible monolith out in the Four Corners area. And the smog from the power plants, you can hardly even see the darn thing sometimes.

So, it's more people -- "more people upon the land" as John's song would always say. And so hopefully some of the images and the work that we've done with so many committed conservation organizations -- and we fly for over 300 of them -- we're all working to get people to understand the challenges and try to address them appropriately.

L: Bruce, you mentioned a minute ago the pandemic. The coronavirus pandemic has obviously just been devastating for all of us, but nobody's been hit harder than tribal people in this country. And this spring you led an effort involving pilots who were friends of yours to deliver by air a quarter of a million PPEs to five different tribes at a time they were in desperate need. What are your most vivid memories of that experience?

B: The first thing that comes to mind are the FedEx trucks. Janey did this. We have Deon Ben -- he is one of the leaders in the Navajo Nation and he's one of our board members -- and we've done a lot of work with Deon. And Janey was chatting with him and other people and talking with one of the foundations that supports us trying to figure out what was going on, trying to get an idea of the lay of the land, about different conservation needs for the Tribes.

And then we found out that one of the foundations was trying to get materials to the Tribes. And there were these incredible convoluted administrative hoops they had to jump through, getting these to the communities. And Deon said: "This is not working, the people are not getting these PPEs which are so important. Nobody's getting them."

So Janey said: "Well look, we can do this -- we can get these supplies to these remote areas. And what you need to do foundation, please, is get us the materials." And then Janey said to the leaders that she knew and worked with on conservation issues: "We're going to get this material, now you figure out how many goes to where, and goes to what."

And we dealt with five different Tribes, which is in itself a challenge. We landed on six or seven landing strips and we delivered this material.

But I said “the FedEx trucks,” because I thought at first: ok we’ll get some material and I’ll repackage them, and I’ll put them in plastic bags, and I’ll fill my Cessna up, and I’ll make two or three trips to a couple places. But we got a quarter of a million of these PPEs. And what is a quarter of a million? Well, it’s these two huge FedEx trucks.

And so then we said: “What the heck are we going to do with this?” And we got some volunteers and Atlantic Aviation let us use a hanger. And we boxed them up, we figured out where it was going to go. And then I said: “Well if I do the flying, it’s going to take me a month.”

So I went down the flight line -- and these incredible characters in Aspen responded, I mean these guys are so talented. And we had about 10 airplanes in the end. And we actually produced a video on this, which is pretty cool -- and you can see all the airplanes taking off in a very loose formation spreading out and going to these different five airstrips, doing two or three trips. And we unloaded it all -- and it was a very very timely work that we did because as you said, it really was hitting the Indigenous folks and Native Americans very very hard at the time.

L: Well thank you, what an immense contribution -- and thanks to your friends who pitched in. So flying during the pandemic has posed a whole new set of problems for you. But you’ve taken to offering virtual flights, which involve GoPro cameras. And you’ve been sleeping under the wing of your plane to avoid motels. What has been the most challenging and perhaps rewarding about these innovations that you’ve crafted with Jane to overcome constraints imposed by the pandemic and connect with people?

B: Again, my little sense of humor, whatever -- the answer to that is: GoPro batteries. The GoPro batteries were the most challenging -- and they turned out to create the most rewarding experiences in many ways. The problem was that GoPro batteries only worked for about 40 minutes.

So when we came up with the idea of offering virtual aerial educational tours, we were going to use GoPros. And they capture some really good images. We have a talented video guy that works with us, so we go out and capture the images, we bring them back, our video guy edits them. And then we work with the conservation organizations that are working on these specific issues, everything from the Gallatin National Forest Plan up there outside near you up in Bozeman to the Crazy Mountains -- I spend all summer doing these things -- everything from the fires in California to just the last week, some mining issues in the Southwest with Roger Featherstone.

So you create these virtual tours and they can be used for a myriad of uses. You can use them for talking to various stakeholders and educating them on the issue. Or what I really like is when we get them out to the press, and they get on the TV and there’s discussions about them.

And we did this one virtual tour near here in North Park, near Walden and Steamboat, Colorado. And the next couple of days -- we responded quickly -- we got them to a meeting of the commission on oil and gas that had something to do with the methane flaring. So our tours were used for that -- so they can be very impactful, and they can be very long lasting and educational.

But again, the idea is getting these GoPros to capture what you want. And sometimes the issue does not go along with where they are, compared to where an airport is. So you have all these logistical issues. How much fuel do I have, etc?

So we got to finding these little airstrips which I hadn't been in for years and years and years. So I would go into these little airstrips and I'd land, and I'd sleep at them for the night like you said. So that was really rewarding, being out -- and it was back to camping days, and really fun for me in many ways, although it was challenging. Then get up early in the morning and then fly the GoPros over the issue.

And then I was always working hard to have the right weight and balance in these small air strips, which challenged my pilot skills. And then being out and camping at night -- and Janey would come with me, so it was romantic sometimes. It was just a nice way to do it, although it was difficult sometimes.

But the stuff we produced we were very proud of from these virtual aerial educational tours. I think are pretty well done for the organizations we worked with that comment and advocate and educate about these particular issues.

L: Well Bruce, it's common for pilots and astronauts to describe spiritual experiences when they're up in the air and in space. Have you had any experiences you might define as magical or mystical? And why do you think that flying in a plane thousands of feet or hundreds of feet up in the air or seeing earth from space can be spiritual?

B: Wow, well again maybe because we talked about John earlier, one mystical kind of experience occurred when we were on our way in his Lear jet to Houston. We took off at night, and all the sudden we saw a light way to the right. And we're flying along dead night -- it's just hard to describe flying at night, it's just really beautiful and quiet and you feel like you are up in space especially in that kind of airplane.

And we saw a light, and I was up in the cockpit and John's pilot was there too. And he says: "What is that light?" And we both didn't know what it was. And we talked to ATC, Air Traffic Control, and they say: "We're not painting anything out there, we don't have any radar out there." And all the sudden over the radio you would hear: "Hey, what's that light at 2 o'clock?" Or: "What's that light at 4 o'clock?"

And so all these different aircraft were reporting this light. So we all get into -- especially John gets into this spiritual, mystical thing -- flying saucers and outer space and the cosmos. And it was really pretty intense.

And really, I don't know what to say, mystical. What are the possibilities? What is there out there?

And it reminds me -- John had a friend who I became very good friends with named Bonnie Dunbar, who was an astronaut up in the Space Shuttle. And she was up here doing some mountain flying, she could fly T-38s, these jets back and forth, but she was pretty inexperienced with small planes. And she was going back to Spokane where her parents lived in a small plane, and she had to across the Rockies. So she stopped in to visit with me and we did some mountain flying, I helped her out with at least getting across her route.

But I remember one night in particular, we were sitting in the cabin and looking at the picture that she has seen so often -- it was on Time Magazine -- Earth was the person of the year at that time, that picture of earth from outer space. And she had seen that. And it just was a feeling that you're such a small part of the cosmos, you're just, you're existing on a different plane.

And I feel that way in an airplane sometimes, I'm flying above it. And Janey said it really well, because I knew you might pose this kind of a question. She says she feels that she's in an entirely different dimension, in part of the ether, not part of the world, just sort of watching as an observer.

And it reminded me, I guess, of when I first came to Colorado, if you go all the way back to what you said when a city guy came out to the mountains and sleeping under the stars as I did when I was first learning to climb. And I'd look at those stars. And people would say that some of those stars went out millenniums ago or whatever. So what is real? Where are you at with this? What is the spirit of it all?

You feel that spirit in the mountains, especially heightened like you shared so eloquently about when you're out there with the grizzly bear or walking around in the woods. And I feel like that a lot when I'm up in the air by myself just looking at the world and the planet, and just being very grateful to be able to think and feel what life really is.

L: Wow, well Bruce this has been an honor and a treat. Thank you so much. This is Louisa Willcox with Grizzly Times here with pilot Bruce Gordon. Thank you.