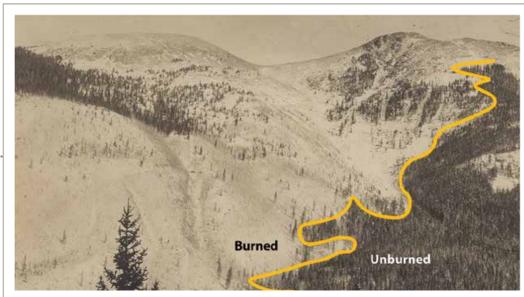


# Seeing the Forest and the Trees



## WILDFIRE LEFT ITS MARK

Fire behaves differently in the high-elevation forests around Taos Ski Valley than it does lower in the valley. Up here where there are forests of spruce and fir, fires historically burned hot and intensely in both large and small patches. The summer of 1842 was a big fire year, and a large burn scar is visible in old photos. In other years, fires burned smaller areas, creating a patchwork of forests at different stages of regrowth. Then fire was excluded from Taos Ski Valley for more than 100 years. The forest today has fewer patches of younger trees, so we face greater danger of fast-moving, high-intensity fires.



The patterns created by historical fires are still evident today. The old photograph shows a clear line between the burned and unburned area. Today the burned area has regrown as a mix of spruce, fir and aspen. © Private collection

## Aspen follows fire

At this elevation, aspen are among the first trees to return to burned areas. Their growth, stimulated by fire, creates patches of aspen that break up the evergreen trees that are highly flammable fuel for fires.

Thinning here at Twining Campground in 2017 benefited aspen. Tree cutters removed young fir trees that would eventually shade out the aspen. The thinning work reduces the risk of a severe fire around homes in the Taos Ski Valley.

Elk and deer make a meal of aspen, and their browse of tender shoots limits aspen regrowth. Take a look at the young aspen here. Can you see where elk or deer have nipped the leaves or buds off with their teeth? Bigger fire patches are one way to regrow aspen, since they help create more tree sprouts than wildlife can eat.



CLOCKWISE: The tree thinning project here removed the spruce, fir and pine trees and left the aspen. The aspens are favored here near the Village of Taos Ski Valley to help protect homes from fast-moving wildfire. © Peter Walker

## Got history?

Humans are part of this valley's past and present. Native Americans have hunted here since time immemorial. Miners arrived in the 1600s, finding gold and copper. By 1897, there were 200 miners working 10 mines that produced around 600 tons of gold, silver, copper and lead ore per day, including deposits found on Gold Hill. Transporting the ore to market was difficult and, by 1903, the mines were closed. Activity in the valley quieted down until the 1950s, when Ernie and Rhoda Blake created a ski resort here. Today, the rugged slopes of Taos Ski Valley mountain resort are a dramatic backdrop for adventure. Recreation drives the economy, both here and throughout Taos County. Protecting nature's assets—trees, water, snow, fish and wildlife—is vital for visitors and the community year-round.

## Hide and seek

Most birds need trees, and the Clark's nutcracker is certainly no exception. Thriving in mountains from Canada to Mexico, this common bird, slightly larger than a robin, prefers to nest in cone-laden conifer forests, where it can open white or limber pine cones with its long, sharp beak and feast on the seeds. The Clark's nutcracker is known for hiding seeds and recalling where they're stashed when it's time to eat—sometimes a whole year later! Not every seed is found; some that are left behind sprout into new trees. This behavior supports new tree growth and genetic diversity that keeps high-elevation forests healthy.

Clark's nutcrackers are common in this area, so keep your eyes and ears open while exploring. Chances are good that you may spot one!



LEFT TO RIGHT: The background of the historical photo shows the burned area. Notice how today it has regrown, with different colors of vegetation showing the patchy arrangement of spruce, fir and aspen regrowth. © Private collection; © Google Earth, USGS



CLOCKWISE: Compare the old photo to the current view and see if you can find the remnant patches of forest from the historical photo in the modern day view. The aspen is easier to see in the fall when the trees turn yellow. © Private collection; © Google Earth, USGS; © Peter Walker



LEFT TO RIGHT: The long beak of the Clark's nutcracker is perfect for extracting seeds that the bird will cache for later eating. Forgotten seeds may germinate. See if you can find any seedlings nearby. © iStockphotos



## Partnership for nature

The Taos Valley Watershed Coalition is working to restore the Rio Hondo and other forest areas that supply water to people in the Taos Valley and the Rio Grande basin. The Coalition's goals are to reduce overgrown trees and brush that act as fuel for fires and to restore natural fire when and where it is safe to do so. Some of the partners include: Carson National Forest, The Nature Conservancy, Taos County, Taos Pueblo, Town of Taos, Taos Soil and Water Conservation District, Taos Ski Valley Inc., Trout Unlimited, Village of Taos Ski Valley, FireWise communities and others.

The Taos Valley is one focal area for the Rio Grande Water Fund: a public-private partnership with more than 60 agencies, organizations and businesses participants. The Water Fund goal is to restore 600,000 acres of at-risk forests over 20 years to secure critical water sources for over 1 million people from Taos to Albuquerque and beyond.



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