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RETIRED SILVICULTURIST Melissa Jenkins poses outside her home near Bigfork. (Hailey Smalley/Daily Inter Lake)

Silviculturist plants seeds of hope for threatened species

By **HAILEY SMALLEY**
Daily Inter Lake

The whitebark pine is a testament to strength. Growing high on alpine ridges, where few other trees can survive, the whitebark pine persists. Its gray-white bark bleaches in the harsh summer sun and twists against hurricane-force winds. Gnarled roots clench tight to rocky ridgeline soils, even in the deepest of snows.

“It’s such an iconic tree. It’s like the stalwart soldier that can withstand all this stuff Mother Nature throws at it,” retired silviculturist Melissa Jenkins said. “Just its tenacity. It’s so inspiring.”

Like the tree, Jenkins is steadfast, perhaps a bit headstrong. She spent the better part of a four-decade career in the U.S. Forest Service studying, growing and planting whitebark pine trees at a time when the species faced widespread decline. Even in her retirement, the “Lorax of whitebark,” as colleagues are wont to call her, has been an instrumental voice in the restoration and conservation of the high-alpine pine.

Whitebark pines play a central role in ecosystems across the Rocky Mountain West. Their large nutrient-packed seeds are a staple in the pre-hibernation diets of grizzly bears and squirrels, as well as a perennial food source for birds like the Clark’s nutcracker. Evergreen canopies provide year-round shade that slows snowmelt while roots hold on to soil and help stabilize cliffsides.

The ongoing decline of whitebark pines threatens not only the trees themselves, but all these essential functions. Researchers estimate that more than half of all standing whitebark pine trees in the United States are dead. In some areas, including Glacier National Park, mortality rates

Monday PROFILE Melissa Jenkins

have climbed higher than 90%.

Bark beetle outbreaks and changing fire regimes play a role in the sudden decline, but the main killer is an invasive fungus called white pine blister rust. Infected trees are often “flagged” with strips of red needles before the fungus spreads to the trunk in the form of yellow-orange cankers. The rust spreads inward, “suffocating” the tree by cutting the canopy off from its supply of water and nutrients.

“It’s heartbreaking to see the rust,” Jenkins said. “I feel like we’re obligated to do our best to restore [the whitebark pine], to get it back on the ecosystem.”

THERE MAY be no better person for that task than Jenkins. Even as a child, she had a green thumb and a penchant for plants. At 10 years old, she begged her parents to let her scrape up a patch of their Midwestern backyard for a vegetable garden. Her senior yearbook photo featured the caption, “Plans to go into forestry.”

But it wasn’t until 1991 that Jenkins caught what she jokingly referred to as “whitebark fever.” By then, she had already spent eleven seasons on the Caribou-Targhee National Forest in Idaho, doing everything from surveying timber to fighting wildfires. A colleague who specialized in wildlife biology approached Jenkins with a new project.

In 1988, massive wildfires ripped through the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, incinerating about 28% of the national park’s whitebark pines.

The biologist wanted to plant whitebark pine seedlings at the burned sites, but growing the trees was proving to be challenging. Nearly every single seed the biologist planted that year died without germinating.

“Back then, we really didn’t know much about what we were doing,” Jenkins said. “It wasn’t whitebark’s fault. It was our fault for not knowing.”

And Jenkins wanted to know. When the next bumper crop occurred in 1996, she was ready with a bucket truck borrowed from a local electric company. Her team harvested thousands of cones, and Jenkins spent most of the winter bent over a tray, painstakingly prying each seed from the sap-soaked scales.

This time, the hard work paid off. A few years later, 85% of the seeds had germinated and were ready for replanting. Jenkins tucked the tender shoots into their new homes.

She visited often to take note of which trees flourished and which seemed to suffer from too much sunlight or too few nutrients. She learned that seedlings planted on the northeast side of logs and rocks grew better than those planted on the southwest side and that whortleberry catalyzed growth while the tough fibrous roots of beargrass suffocated the young trees.

Each discovery paved the way for more planting projects, not only in the Caribou-Targhee National Forest, but throughout the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. A few years after undertaking her first whitebark pine planting project, Jenkins penned the first comprehensive restoration strategy for the region.

“Up until then, we really had no plan forward,” she recalled.

WITH THE future of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem’s whitebark pines

See **PINES**, A6

Changes to the agency charged with securing elections lead to midterm worries

By **STEVE KARNOWSKI** and **JULIE CARR SMYTH**
Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Since it was created in 2018, the federal government’s cybersecurity agency has helped warn state and local election officials about potential threats from foreign governments, showed officials how to protect polling places from attacks and gamed out how to respond to the unexpected, such as an Election Day bomb threat or sudden disinformation campaign.

The agency was largely absent from that space for elections this month in several states, a potential preview for the 2026 midterms. Shifting priorities of the Trump administration, staffing reductions and budget cuts have many election officials concerned about how engaged the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency will be next year, when control of Congress will be at stake in those elections.

Some officials say they have begun scrambling to fill the anticipated gaps.

See **ELECTIONS**, A5

In Geneva, US and Ukraine officials report progress on ending Russia’s war

Few specifics offered

By **MARK CARLSON**, **KATIE MARIE DAVIES** and **WILL WEISSERT**
Associated Press

GENEVA — Top U.S. and Ukrainian officials said Sunday they’d made progress toward ending the Russia-Ukraine war but provided scant details after discussing the American proposal to achieve peace that has sparked concerns among many of Washington’s European allies that the plan is too conciliatory to Moscow.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said high-stakes talks in Geneva were “very worthwhile” and constituted the most productive day in “a very long time.”

“I feel very optimistic that we can get something done,” Rubio said.

But he offered very little information on what was discussed. He also downplayed a Thursday deadline set by President Donald Trump for Ukraine to respond to the plan, saying simply that officials want to see fighting stop as soon as possible and that officials could keep negotiating Monday and beyond. He said that higher-level officials may eventually have to get involved.

“This is a very delicate

See **WAR**, A6

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