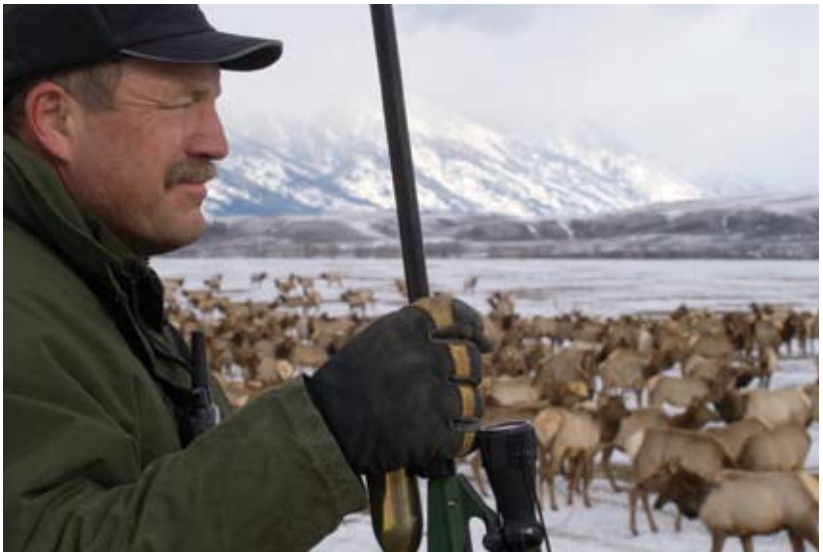
Master Teambuilder

STEVE KILPATRICK *crafts networks of unlikely allies*

By Divya Abhat



Credit: Mark Gocke/WGFD

Current Position
Habitat Biologist for the Wyoming Game and Fish Department

Favorite Aspect of Job Mentoring younger biologists and building Super Bowl-quality teams of individuals with diverse skills and backgrounds that are unstoppable in conserving wildlife and their habitats

Favorite Book
Thinking Like a Mountain by Susan L. Flader

If I Were in Charge of the World
I would teach folks to leave natural resources in a better condition than when they arrived.

Quote to Live By "This crop of wisdom never fails, but it is not always harvested." *–Aldo Leopold*

Steve Kilpatrick oversees a herd of elk at the National Elk Refuge in Jackson, Wyoming.

Fall of 1974: An enthusiastic Steve Kilpatrick waited outside his advisor's office. It was his first day as an undergraduate student in wildlife management at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. For him this degree was far from a fleeting ambition; wildlife management was a path he was certain he wanted to pursue. Enter Ronald Case, longtime professor in the fisheries and wildlife department at the university. "Why do you want to be in this field?" he asked. "The pay is low, competition for jobs is stiff, and the challenges are high. I just don't encourage you to be here."

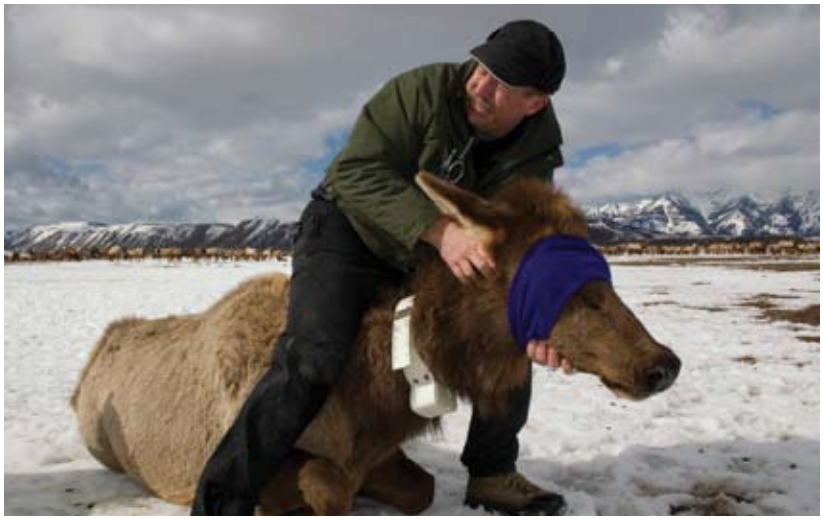
Kilpatrick didn't flinch. "You're not turning me away, and I'll show you," he thought, and called Case's bluff. "It was done to see if I had some grit," Kilpatrick says. Whether motivated by stubbornness or plain determination, Kilpatrick finished his undergraduate and then graduate degrees, and in 1978 began working as a wildlife habitat development technician with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department. By 1988, Kilpatrick had been promoted to wildlife habitat development area supervisor and moved to Jackson, Wyoming, where he continues to work as the area's habitat biologist.

Today, Kilpatrick refers to himself as the "two cents worth of glue" that holds the million dollar pieces of a puzzle together—a metaphor inspired by the grandmother of the conservation movement, Mardy Murrie. Three years after Kilpatrick's transfer to Jackson, he approached Murrie for guidance on managing wildlife habitats in the region. "I was flailing," Kilpatrick recalls. "I didn't feel like I was getting anything done." Over cups of tea and chocolate cookies in Murrie's living room, Kilpatrick presented slides of habitat conditions and soaked up advice on managing habitat. Kilpatrick recalls Murrie's instruction: Meet with as many professionals as you can, from policymakers to landowners. Build relationships, and mold them into unstoppable "teams."

"I left her home with a whole new philosophy," Kilpatrick says, "and it was that you don't have to be the smartest person in the room, just the person who holds all the smart people together." That philosophy has remained with Kilpatrick throughout his career. Whether he's negotiating management of habitat to control disease transmission, or minimizing livestock-wildlife conflicts, Kilpatrick works to bring smart people together to find common ground for effectively managing and conserving wildlife.

In fact, in 2003 Kilpatrick won the Craighead Wildlife Conservation Award for work bringing diverse parties together to create a conservation success.

Around that time, grizzly bears (*Ursus arctos horribilis*) had killed more than 100 cattle within a huge grazing allotment in the Bridger-Teton National Forest. The grizzly activities had forced those with grazing permits to consider suspending use of the land for livestock; over time the area had also became an important habitat for other wild animals, including elk, mountain lions, and wolves. Kilpatrick brought livestock owners with grazing permits together with others, including the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and the U.S. Forest Service, to discuss the potential benefits of reducing or removing grazing allotments from those public lands. Kilpatrick played a significant role in fostering positive negotiations among the diverse stakeholders, as well as in raising $250,000 that was eventually used to purchase the grazing allotments. "It wasn't so much of a compromise," he says, as it was creating "a third option where everyone wins."



Credit: Mark Gocke/WGFD

Kilpatrick prepares to release a collared elk during a study on elk selection of winter ranges. The study resulted from an alliance between USFWS and WGFD.

Lessons Learned

Born and raised on a ranch in eastern Nebraska, Kilpatrick spent a lot of his time with his grandfather, whose people skills were inspiring. "He was a good listener and seldom let his temper interfere with his listening." That personality trait is evident in Kilpatrick's daily interactions, whether he's convincing landowners to allow their property to be used as wildlife habitat, or discussing land management with a population biologist. Success, says Kilpatrick, is "all about people skills." He sees the lack of training in this area as one of the biggest challenges to the wildlife profession. "Many people in this field are not gregarious. We got into it because we thoroughly enjoy solitude, being alone out on top of the mountain or out in the prairie somewhere. That's where our battery gets charged and that's what we love to do."

Kilpatrick hammers away at the importance of effective communication skills while mentoring aspiring wildlife managers—a role he took up five years ago. "Most of us aren't working directly with the critters. We're trying to instill an appreciation from the society … and you can't do that by just being out there catching deer and antelope, and putting collars on them," he says. Over the years in the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, Kilpatrick has mentored young biologists and graduate students, always emphasizing what Murrie told him: "Network, network, network. Build teams, build teams, build teams."

Kilpatrick's inspiration has also come from another mentor, Gary Butler, his supervisor for more than 20 years. The two men met in 1978, and since then Kilpatrick says he's learned to anchor all his decisions in the answer to the question Butler insists all wildlife professionals must ask each day: "Is what you're doing good for wildlife?" According to Butler, all wildlife professionals must act as advocates for the silent constituency of wildlife and natural resources. "I'm very fortunate to have a supervisor who sees the big picture," Kilpatrick says.

Currently, Kilpatrick continues to implement habitat improvement projects and mentor by working with the University of Wyoming on researching habitat selection and nutrition for moose and bighorn sheep and determining mortality rates of adults and juveniles. He is also working with students of Iowa State University studying how elk select winter and spring ranges. "I love young minds and new ideas," he says.

Many Hats for One Career

Along with mentoring students, Kilpatrick has also played a significant role in integrating habitat into the Brucellosis-Feedground-Habitat program in northwest Wyoming. He's accomplished this by working with state biologists in developing joint habitat inventories, improving habitat, and monitoring for disease. He consults with population biologists when making recommendations about habitat conditions, focusing mostly on prescribed burns and allotment adjustments—measures that are critical to winter ranges of large game animals. Throughout his career, he has also maintained a focus on wildlife disease. "Disease in wildlife keeps

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growing in importance," Kilpatrick says, pointing to it as a significant concern for wildlife managers.

Kilpatrick has a difficult time "saying no to the good things." Whether it's to contribute to a county plan, or a wildlife habitat enhancement project, Kilpatrick doesn't have it in him to opt out. As new solutions emerge that might help mitigate or alleviate cumulative effects on wildlife and wildlife habitat, Kilpatrick cannot help but add more to his professional plate. "I get paid to speak for the critters," he says, "and if I don't go to the meetings, or take on the task of developing a plan, an elk isn't going to walk in here and do it for me." With so much to do, and so few wildlife professionals to do it, Kilpatrick admits it's tough. "There's not many of us," he says. "We're probably one tenth of one percent of the populous hired to maintain the integrity of wildlife habitat."

Divya Abhat is a science writer for The Wildlife Society.