by INDIA H. WOOD

GOING Diagonal

Boulder woman meets cowboys and butterflies on an epic hike from one corner of Colorado to the other

India H. Wood celebrates crossing the Continental Divide at Boreas Pass, south of Breckenridge, on her three-month hike across Colorado.

India H. Wood

In 2020, India H. Wood of Boulder drew a diagonal line on a map from the state's southeast corner to the northwest corner and set out on a 730-mile hike across Colorado. Her goal was to experience the breadth of people and places to be found in the state. She shares with Colorado Life *some of the memorable encounters from her remarkable journey.*

PERCHED LIKE A ski racer on a manhole cover set in a dirt road. Dribbly iron welds spelled out "OKLA 1907/KANS 1861/COLO 1876" – the years of statehood of the three states that meet at this point. I envisioned it also proclaiming INDIA 2020, the year of learning to stand on my own two feet and meeting the land and people along an arbitrary diagonal line across my home state. I began walking May 11.

"We feeling feisty and ready for fun?" I hollered to Dennis Lyamkin, a 23-year-old environmentalist, outdoorsman and the only friend willing to start the hike with me, age 53 and an inexperienced backpacker. "Heck, yes!"

We high-fived each other and strode west on the sandy ribbon of Colorado's Baca County Road A. We turned north on County Road 57, west on C, north on 56, west on D, forcing my diagonal expedition to temporarily obey our American right-angled civilization. Barbed wire fences around each private section of land – rustling fields of last year's corn or whispering prairie – prevented any diagonal bushwhacking.

Black and white lark buntings, the Colorado state bird, swooped onto barbed wire fences, calling "birdy birdy birdy wheeee!" Kansas winds carried bovine funk from distant feedlots and the diesel thump of irrigation pumps.

A truck rattled up next to us as we walked the road. The window rolled down and a voice floated out, "What are you doin' out here?"

"I'm India Wood, and I'm hiking diagonally across Colorado from the southeast to northwest corners. This is my friend Dennis."

"That's something new. Never seen hikers out here before. Where you from?"

"Boulder."

He winced.

My hometown of Boulder, sometimes called "the People's Republic," has a reputation as the most liberal in the state, especially compared with rural counties. Boulder County voted 77 percent for Biden in 2020, while southeast corner Baca County voted 84 percent for Trump.

"But I was born and raised in Colorado Springs."

Trump beat Biden in Colorado Springs' El Paso County by 10 percentage points.

He nodded.

"You have a good walk."

WALKING GIVES YOU a license to talk to anyone, and for anyone to talk to you. If I had been in a vehicle no one would have pulled over to say hi. On a "real" hiking trail like the Colorado Trail, I would have met mostly other hikers. On foot, hiking across the state on my own route, I needed to meet locals to get permission to camp and hike on their land. By walking, I became part of the landscape and local community. It helped that I spoke a bit of ranch language, having spent teenage summers on ranches near Limon and Maybell.

My older brother had doubted anyone would help me that year of the divisive 2020 Trump-Biden election and COVID-19. My brother had also doubted I had the strength and outdoor skills to do the hike of about 730 miles. He was right – in January. By early May, I had taken classes in backcountry navigation, wilderness first aid and backpacking, and physically transformed myself from a middle-aged schlub into a backpacking beast.

Hugh Carey/The Colorado Sun

Wood packs up for the day's hike of 12 miles and 2,600 feet of vertical over Castle Peak near Wolcott. She carried 30 pounds, including an emergency beacon, first aid and survival kits, iPhone with Gaia GPS, compass, paper maps and a poetry book.

After shutting a metal ranch gate with a "NO TRESPASSING" sign on it, Dennis and I left the road grid behind to hike 8 miles on the two-track paths of the Kelly ranch to Kletis Kelly's brick house. Kletis limped out, his knee stiff after a bull had mashed him into the corral fence. At age 79, he still put in a hard day's work beneath a gentle smile. "You made it!" he said. "I knew you would."

I had met Kletis a month ago because I would need to walk across his ranch on my diagonal route. The Kellys were Republicans and evangelical Christians who used chemical fertilizers and herbicides on their fields of milo and wheat. They killed coyotes so the predators wouldn't eat their calves, they said. As a consumer of organic foods, I was horrified at first, but then Kletis' son told me the price of wheat was one-third what it was in 1960, now so cheap in 2020 there was no money for more expensive organic methods. I read that 99 percent of American wheat, corn, and soy fields use chemical fertilizers and herbicides. What I bought at Natural Grocers did not change 99 percent of the picture. But how could I speak up politically without alienating my new friends? For now, I kept quiet and listened.

I liked Kletis. He said since God loves everyone unconditionally, we should, too. We agreed that was a hard task, but it was part of my "going diagonal" philosophy of talking with everyone, of breaking through the self-created boundaries that divide us in this state.

The Kellys' home smelled of barbecued pork ribs and dusty work boots. Family photos and Christian inspirational plaques hung on the walls. I kept my chair back from the farm table seating seven of us, so nervous about COVID I started to cough violently and threw my long-sleeved elbow across my mouth. Dennis gave me a stern look. No one wore COVID masks here. To have put one on or asked to eat outdoors would have offended them. Instead, we savored pork ribs, potatoes and salad, and drank iced tea while listening to family stories and the lessons therein.

Kletis reminisced about a 1975 tornado that flattened their farm and killed livestock. Their driveway's line of elm trees, nurtured for decades on the dry plains, had been ravaged to ragged stumps. He said he began to cry at the seeming impossibility of rebuilding his family's life but then heard a voice: "Listen to the birds singing, perched in the broken-off elm trees."

I often remembered that quote along my hike when I started to lose hope, to feel defeated by what I could not control. Like most city dwellers, I thought I could control most things. Not out here. Listen to the birds.

I REACHED LA JUNTA on May 25, amazed I had hiked 150 miles. Dennis accompanied me the first four days to Springfield, then my 23-year-old youngest child, Charli Mandel, walked six days with me across the Rule Creek and Purgatoire River canyonlands to La Junta. Kletis had called me and left a voicemail in his gentle drawl: "Wondering how you were getting along on the trail. Hope everything is going great. Catch you later."

Yep, going just dandy, I thought, picking at my cracked and sunburned lips. I called Kletis back and confessed that before La Junta, Charli and I had been cornered in our tent by a drunk in the night, nearly froze to death and been chased off the trail by the Cherry Can-

yon Fire. Kletis chuckled and said, "But you made it to La Junta. You weren't even sure you'd get that far, but you did."

He would be my Gandalf, checking in every few weeks as I crossed the state along the Great East roads, through the Misty Mountains and Mirkwood, and into the Lonely Mountain. I would discover my dwarvish companions along the way, in unexpected disguises.

IN EARLY JULY, my feet dragged up the jeep ruts of National Forest Road 146 from Tarryall Reservoir over the hills that border South Park. I was delighted I had made it halfway across the state, past Pueblo, Colorado Springs, Pikes Peak and Florissant. But my heart felt half-dead with loneliness, only a few friends willing and able to hike with me for a couple of days each. I expected this vast land would swallow me whole, or I would drift into the sky like an untethered balloon. I tried to grab hold of something. Grasshoppers clicked and jumped beneath clumps of grass. Limber pines gyrated in the wind. Clouds tumbled eastward over the distant Continental Divide.

At the end of a long downhill, a dozen butterflies ambushed me. They flitted over the two-track and landed to lick salt from the mud in a tire rut. Squatting, I could hear their wings beat and marveled at each butterfly's unique pattern, like grandmother quilts of black, orange, brown and gold. I grabbed hold of their presence, and my heart steadied.

Hearing a distant buzz, I glanced up to see two motorcycles cresting the ridge ahead. My mind slunk into a *Mad Max* movie, with closeups of missing teeth and spiked gloves. Many hikers scowl at motorcycles on public land, even on an official Jeep trail like this.

The men slowed down the hill and putt-putted toward me. I contemplated quick strides to a granite outcrop I could climb for safety, but I stood my ground along with my winged friends. As the bikers rolled close, I smiled anyway and gestured at the dozen butterflies in my rut. They cut their engines. Together we witnessed the butterfly dance, talking quietly about where we were from and where we were headed. Smiling beatifi-

India H. Wood (both)

Charli Mandel

Wood stops for a few selfies along the trail with Cristina Harmon at Irish Canyon, Wyatt and Suzanne Edinger at Juniper Hot Springs, and Bret Carwin, Brett Wilson and Charli Mandel on the Wilson Ranch southeast of La Junta.

cally, one biker told me about an exploding hillside of red Indian paintbrush that I should look for along my route, where they had just come from. I found their flowers.

I found flowers and men in other places, too, kindred spirits I never would have met while driving a car.

IN EARLY AUGUST, I strode a four-wheel-drive trail east of Meeker, near the summit of Sleepy Cat Peak, my last of a dozen ascents above 10,000 feet. Stands of white-trunked aspen and dark spruce and fir jostled meadows of skunk cabbage and wildflowers – red, yellow, white and purple. Two familiar border collies and a grulla-colored horse turned their heads to watch me grow from a distant dot to a hiker coming up the ruts.

"Howdy!" I called. A lariat circled the horse's neck and disappeared into the knee-high grass and wildflowers. "Hiker coming through."

A brown-plaid arm arose from the bouquet, then a head squinting from sleep. The 60-something sheepherder with a deeply tanned face and merry eyes ambled toward me. Two border collies gamboled at his feet. The sheepherder made one hand gesture, and his work buddies slunk to the ground, grinning.

"¡Buenas tardes, Toledo!" I said. I had met this Peruvian shepherd, Toledo Echeberria, while scouting my route. I rubbed the heads of the border collies now leaning against my legs.

"¿Los perros grandes?" I asked "¿Grr-rrr?" I mimed a fierce dog and pointed over the hill, where I could hear baaing and barking.

"Sí," Toledo said. "Four dogs."

I pointed to myself, then grimaced and held out my hands, as if to ask the question, "What should I do when I get to those dogs?"

"You say BACK!" he shouted. "Point to sheep. Dogs no hurt you."

"Whew!" I put my hand on my heart. "Good to see you. Muchas gracias, señor."

The two-track meandered north through grassy meadows and archipelagoes of evergreens. Sheep trotted away from me and shook their wooly heads as I called quietly to them, "Hey, sheep. Comin' through. Hey there." Two skinny dogs tore away from the herd toward me, barking, hackles raised like stegosauruses.

"Oh, God help me."

Ice flashed through my innards. I never before thought of myself as a dog's dinner, surely much tastier than coyote if they could get through the nylon wrapper.

"BACK!" I pointed toward the sheep as I vaulted away from them into a squelchy marsh, feet wobbling on boulders as my hiking poles fought to prop up me and my 35-pound pack. The dogs came within a few yards, barking madly while two more hellhounds appeared on the ridge. "BAACK! You bastards!" I pointed at the sheep. "BACK!!" The dogs paused as I hobbled frantically around the herd. The closest dog wagged his tail high, triumphant, and they trotted back to their sheep.

I sent good vibes to Toledo in thanks for his advice. Growing up summers on ranches, I had learned there were people who managed the rangeland sustainably and those who did not. What I saw on Sleepy Cat Peak confirmed this. Up toward Toledo's grazing area, the meadows

Finding a place to camp isn't always easy. Signs point to private cabins near Florissant, where a friend had to ferry Wood to a campground. South of Craig, a sign marks private property that pushed Wood on a long walk to a friendly rancher's cot.

India H. Wood (both)

looked good, with a wide range of plant species. Good sheepherders like Toledo kept the herd moving daily to fresh forage, a neighboring rancher explained.

That night, after the stegosaurus-hackled dogs, as usual I lay terrified of some man coming after me in the middle of nowhere. I felt like a speck of dust on black glass, alone in the universe. Then I thought of Toledo, as content alone beneath the sun as I was. He must go to sleep each night beneath the stars trusting God or nature to look after him. So I had a chat with the nature goddess, asked her to look after me. And slept. There was something special about Sleepy Cat Peak, my antidote to the Lonely Mountain I had climbed so many nights.

Two more weeks, one more mountain to climb way up in the northwest corner, where the cowboy T. Wright Dickinson and a Great Old Broad held my expedition in their hands.

Christina Harmon

By light of her headlamp, Wood puzzles over rancher T. Wright Dickinson's handmade map of possible routes for her final push to the northwest corner. Irish Canyon campground offered picnic tables and a pit latrine – rare luxuries along her route.

I HIKED FROM Sleepy Cat Peak downhill a few days and a vertical mile to the Yampa River, past Maybell, northwest on Highway 318, then turned north to Irish Canyon. I had made my homes in cow pastures, on an army cot in a rancher's workshop, at derelict Juniper Hot Springs, in a friendly Maybell backyard, and at Vermillion Falls, where a new friend delivered fried chicken and chocolate milk to me from Craig.

Along the way, Kletis left me a voicemail: "Wondering how things was going. Maybe you can catch up with me later." I called my friend to soak up his positive energy, my own ebbing after nearly three months of mostly solo hiking and difficult route reconnaissance. Kletis chuckled at my story of a herd of inquisitive yearling cattle who chased me for a mile up a jeep road, like cats after a grasshopper.

Highway 318 just about killed me: three days of joint-pounding pavement in 90-degree heat and a rowdy crosswind that twisted each stride. The sign at the start of the road just outside of Maybell says, "No services next 120 miles." Back in the spring, I expected I would hike mostly trails and bushwhack. But Colorado is surprisingly short of hiking trails. And bushwhacking is a martyr's task with barbed-wire fences to squeeze under about every half mile, plus cactus, cliffs, downed trees to hurdle and landowners who provide free lead to trespassers. So my feet traveled about half dirt roads and four-wheel trails, one-third hiking trails and ranch two-track, and the remainder two-lane paved roads like Highway 318.

Tears carved trails down my sunscreen-and-dirt-crusted cheeks as I reached the Irish Canyon campground on Aug. 14. I felt like I had chisels in my hip joints. A day off, then three more days of hiking, and I would reach the northwest corner! I sourly regarded Cold Spring Mountain, a 2,000-foot climb between me and the end. My body said, "Nope." Maybe this was the end, 20 miles from the real finish line. I could come back some other time and finish. My stomach felt like a sack of cow patties.

A chickadee hollered "dee dee dee" from a pinyon tree.

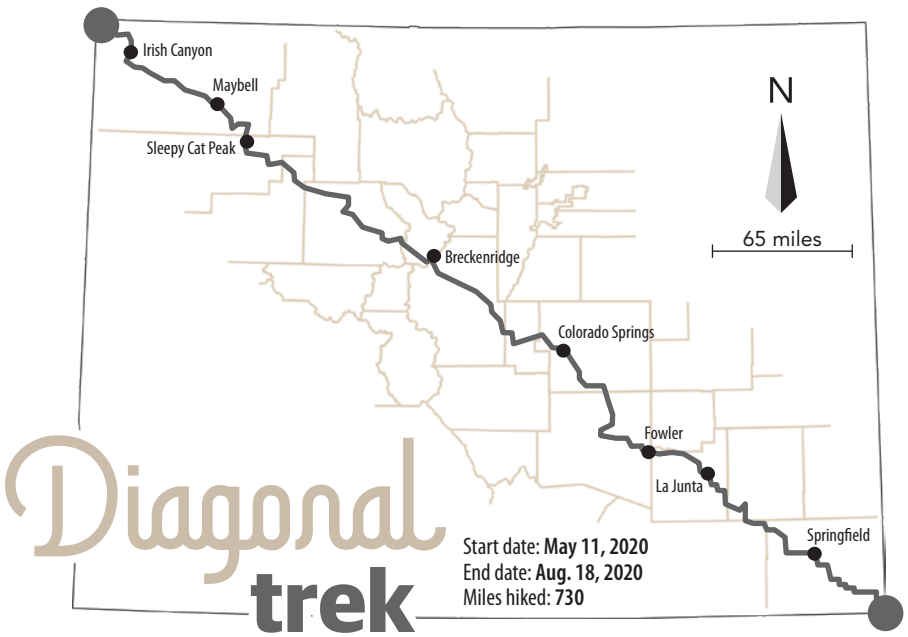
Cristina Harmon, co-chair of the northwest Colorado band of Great Old Broads for the Wilderness, arrived in an aura of cigarette smoke. Back home in Boulder, anyone who smoked was considered deficient. I had never met her in person – she had offered to help me with my hike after seeing the *Colorado Sun* article about my walk.

A few minutes after we met, I said something crabby about her smoking around camp. Then I wisely shut up. Cristina had the carnivorous smile and husky voice of a lioness with a mane of gray curls. The Broads advocated for public lands and tight limits on cattle grazing by ranchers like T. Wright Dickinson. Cristina said she wouldn't argue with him – that wasn't her way. She said the Broads often showed up with cookies, disarming a contentious environmental meeting with older-woman charm. She had the courage of her convictions. Mine had gone all mushy after listening to every viewpoint for three months.

T. Wright Dickinson clattered into camp in his flatbed farm truck after Cristina's Subaru. He was fresh-shaved and wore a tailored striped shirt and cowboy hat the color of a pronghorn's legs. A former Moffat County commissioner and president of the Colorado Cattleman's Association, newspaper articles described him as a formidable advocate for private land. I was grateful he took the time to help me. It turned out he had checked a cowboy reference I'd given him. My friend had said, "She won't cause trouble and will shut the gates. She's too good for Boulder." I was probably the only Boulderite they'd ever sat down with.

T. Wright's articulate hands spread out a map of a potential route to the corner across his family's land and leased holdings on Cold Spring Mountain and Klein's Hill, six sheets of office paper he had color photocopied and taped together. He grew effusive about his proposed route for me, pointing out springs, places

Hugh Carey/The Colorado Sun



for grand views across Brown's Park, and where I might see sage chickens. It sounded lovely. I did my best not to limp as I walked T. Wright back to his truck.

The August evening sun painted the west-facing sandstone cliffs of Irish Canyon gold as Cristina and I talked about my route options on the maps. "I vote Cold Spring Mountain," I said, my eyes avoiding the lioness.

"But your hip is all messed up," she said. "You're walking like an elderly donkey." Cristina's eyes caught mine. "Stick to the roads along here." She tapped her Great Old Broads fingertips on the edge of T. Wright's map. "You can do each segment as a day hike, and I will shuttle you."

"You sure you don't mind?" I squinted at her, a woman I had known only a couple of hours.

"I said I would help you complete your hike, and I will."

"Thank you."

I sipped my rooibos chai tea. Things had a way of working out, especially if kindred spirits decided to help. A cowboy and an environmentalist: I needed to listen to both, but like Cristina, I needed to own up to my environmental priorities. Like a guy I met on the road near the Colorado River said, "I got good friends, some I don't get along with, but they're still my friends."

A gray jay called "weep, wurp" from his perch as he awaited our dinner crumbs.

THE NEXT MORNING, I strode northward toward Talamantes Creek, where T. Wright had helped me contact a neighbor whose land I also needed to cross. T. Wright clattered to a stop next to me in his F-350 dually and asked if I needed anything. I said no, just conversation.

He rested his arm on the open window as we talked about sage grouse, which he called sage chickens and the environmentalists called an endangered species – a good tool to stop energy development. T. Wright was proud his region provided natural gas to heat Denver homes, not that anyone there had ever thanked him for it. I told him I appreciated it.

He explained that ranchers helping out sage chickens *before* the disturbance of energy development was far more effective than remediation afterwards. But the "'ologists," as he called the degreed biologists and ecologists, favored remediation *after*. The 'ologists preferred to stare at a computer screen of numbers and mostly refused to listen to people like T. Wright, who had observed nature over decades of drought cycles. He cared deeply for this land, his home.

Those three days on the Dickinson and Raftopoulos ranch lands, owned or leased from the state and federal government, I saw more wildlife than in any other part of Colorado. A badger charged me when I interrupted her digging for ground squirrels. Herds of pronghorn hustled away from the strange sight of a hiking human. A golden eagle regarded me from a fence post, as did a rattlesnake on the road. The tracks of a bear preceded me over Klein's Hill, the last rise before the state corner.

AT NOON ON Aug. 18, I unclipped the Colorado flag from the back of my pack where it had hung every day since the OK-KS-CO manhole cover monument. I fingered the red C, inner gold circle, and outer blue and inner white stripes still bright, and clipped the flag to the one intact halyard swinging in the wind. Three rusty flagpoles graced the UT-WY-CO corner monument, probably unused in the 21 years since they were set in concrete in a sea of sagebrush scented with dust and cow manure.

"I had no idea there were flagpoles here," I said. "I made it!"

I exchanged high-fives with my husband, Paul Mandel, Charli and an old friend who had kindly joined me that last day. I felt drunk on the fluttering symbol of the state I adored, now high above me. That flag symbolized unity, of several colors in one cloth, an entire state of Democrat-Republican, rural-urban, religious-secular, hiker-biker, hiker-herder and environmentalist-rancher – nearly all good souls who had something to learn from one another. Listen to the birds. Love each other. Just like Kletis says.

In mid-May, India H. Wood begins her second diagonal journey across Colorado. She will set off from the state's northeast corner near Julesburg and hopes to arrive at the southwest corner near Towaoc sometime in August. You can follow her updates from the trail on Facebook and at IndiaHWood.com.

Charli Mandel

Wood hikes with a Colorado flag on her pack. Upon reaching the northwest corner on Aug. 18, 2020, she raised the flag on a pole at the corner marker.