

Endangered Species Act can't save whitebark pines

By Maya L. Kapoor, High Country News

U.S. Forest Service research ecologist Bob Keane has studied whitebark pine, a coniferous tree of the high country, for more than thirty years. Still, when asked to describe a whitebark to someone who's never seen one, he takes a breath and pauses for a moment. "Gosh," he says.

The shape of the tree is very distinctive, Keane says. Instead of growing cone-shaped like other conifers, whitebarks branch like hardwoods. "A lot of the undergrowth is very small, so you see these open park-like stands of beautiful spreading trees," he says. This shape is an adaptation that shows Clark's nutcrackers flying past that a tree below has many nutritious cones and might be worth a travel stop.

Clark's nutcrackers cache thousands of whitebark seeds, dispersing the pine across the high country, where the tree is a keystone species. Whitebark pine is one of the first trees to break ground after a fire, thanks to those nutcrackers, and it stabilizes soil and snowpacks at timberline. Living a millennium or more, whitebarks shape the West's high mountain ecology in countless ways.

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