

# LOSING THE WILD

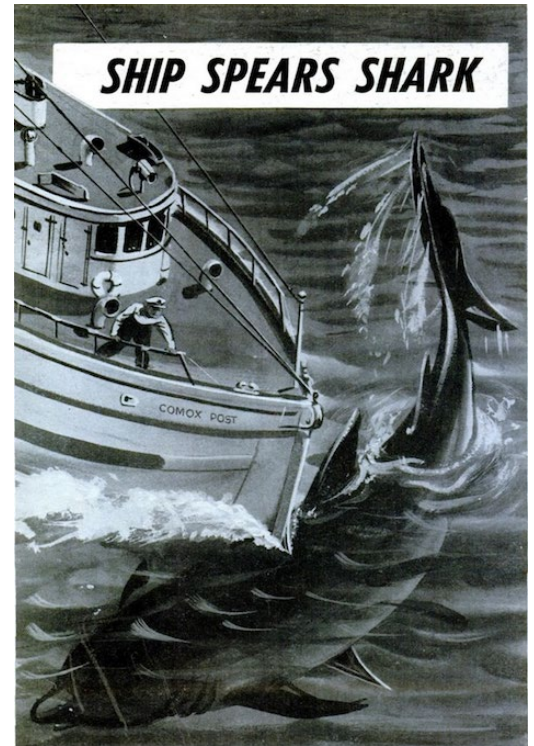
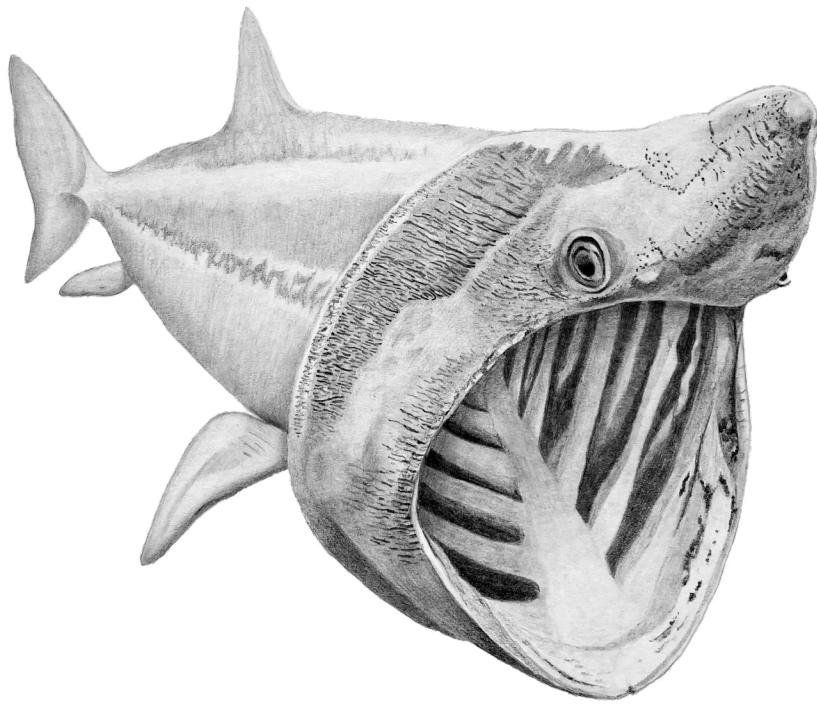
I've been an environmental activist for two decades, and have learned how environmental decline manifests everywhere, including in places we think of as "beautiful" and "pristine," places like Lopez Island. The destruction of the natural environment has a large impact on how I see the world, and I aspire to reflect that in my art.

This series was inspired by the recent surge in new development and the devastating destruction of roadside habitat for utility lines here in San Juan County. The pace of change everywhere, including here, is increasing exponentially, and this change usually means fewer places for wildlife to inhabit.

I hope to convey the rapid pace of habitat loss and declining wildlife through these images and encourage people to take action to protect the natural world.

— Elisabeth Robson, Lopez Island





### *Basking Shark*

One of three species of filter-feeding sharks, Basking Sharks are “gentle giants who cruise slowly through the water, mouths agape, using their massive gill rakers to sieve grain-of-rice-sized crustaceans called copepods and other zooplankton from the water. The sharks can reach a length of 40 feet and weigh up to 7,000 pounds.”

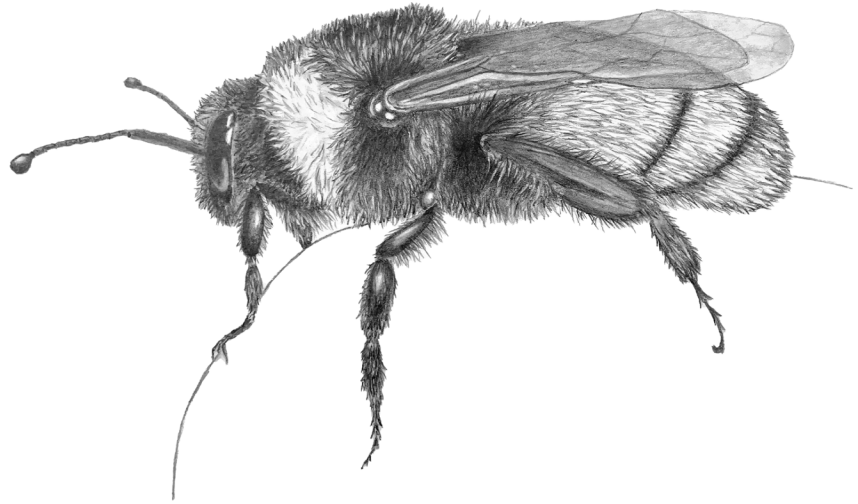
“Basking sharks are the world’s second-largest shark (and fish) species, and while they were once common in some parts of the Salish Sea, they are now so rare that several of the scientists working to better understand them and restore their numbers have never even seen one.”

“In the first half of the 20th century, basking sharks around Washington and British Columbia were targeted by sport and commercial fisheries, the latter of which was focused on harvesting their enormous livers for oil. Meanwhile, the growth of commercial salmon fisheries exacerbated the conflict with humans: the slow-moving sharks often got tangled in salmon gill nets and seines, and their bodies are covered with a slimy mucus that damages fishing gear.”

These amazing sharks were systematically eradicated from the Salish Sea and the B.C. Coast between 1955 and 1970. Canada’s Department of Fisheries and Oceans “launched a basking shark eradication program — with the goal of killing every last one — equipping a fisheries patrol vessel with a giant blade on the prow that would slice straight through the sharks as they fed peacefully at the surface of the water.”

The most recent sighting of a basking shark in the Salish Sea was off the coast of Edmunds in 2014. “Only about 30 sightings have been recorded in Puget Sound and on the B.C. coast since 1996.”

Quotes from [Will these gentle giants return to the Salish Sea](#), The Salish Current, April 2024, by Sarah DeWeerd



*Western Bumblebee*

“If you want fruits and vegetables, you need insects. If you want healthy soils, you need insects. If you want diverse plant communities, you need insects.”

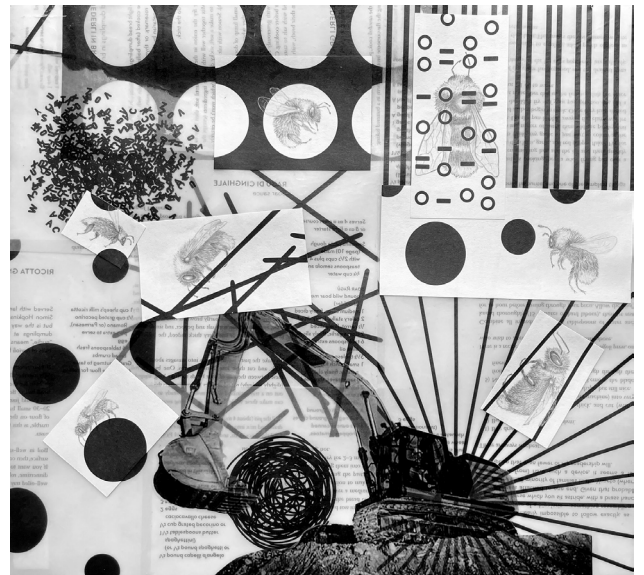
“According to one study, the past quarter of a century has seen US agriculture become a whopping forty-eight times more toxic to insect life, with neonicotinoids responsible for almost all of this noxious surge. Across vast, featureless fields, insects are being systematically maimed, befuddled, and exterminated.

One analysis found that the region defined as the American heartland—Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, most of Missouri, and parts of five other states—has become an incredible 121 times more toxic over the past twenty years for bees. What may look like a benign field of corn to us is, to an insect, more akin to a home that has been replaced by a fetid pit filled with whirring buzzsaws and famished crocodiles.”

“Bumblebees, those large furry insects permanently sewn into their winter coats, are at the point end of this rising heat. A study by the University of Ottawa in 2020 found that bumblebee populations in North America have nearly halved, with those across Europe declining by 17 percent, in recent decades, with the bees suffering worst in areas that have heated up the most rapidly.”

Quotes from *The Insect Crisis* by Oliver Milman

*Bumblebees, disoriented*



“Before the arrival of the Hudson’s Bay Company, black bear, elk, deer and wolves roamed the island. However, the Company’s priorities lay with protecting their investment, and the arrival of the British spelled the demise of some animal species on the island, especially predators. William Macdonald reminisced about his stay in 1851, “Wolves used to prowl round us all night.”

Wolves preyed on Company sheep and were therefore a threat to the farm’s principal product. The shepherders laced sheep carcasses with strychnine to poison the predators. This killed a number of wolves.... Company employees also shot wolves...”

Caleb B. R. Kennerly was a naturalist who visited the San Juan Islands in the years 1857-1861. He encountered wolves on south Lopez in January, 1860. At the time, Hudson Bay Company (HBC) was grazing sheep on the islands, and HBC employee Charles Griffin told Kennerly how HBC’s sheep farmers were dowsing dead sheep with strychnine to poison wolves scavenging the sheep.

Island wolves were probably extirpated by the 1880’s since wolves are not mentioned in early settler accounts.

The wolves on Lopez Island would likely have eaten deer and elk. While deer remain in the islands, elk have also been locally extirpated:

“Hunting by Hudson’s Bay employees (as well as early American settlers) devastated black bear and elk populations on the island, and though some deer remained, their numbers had drastically dwindled by 1860. Henry Custer reported in 1859 that game was “almost extinct” on the island.

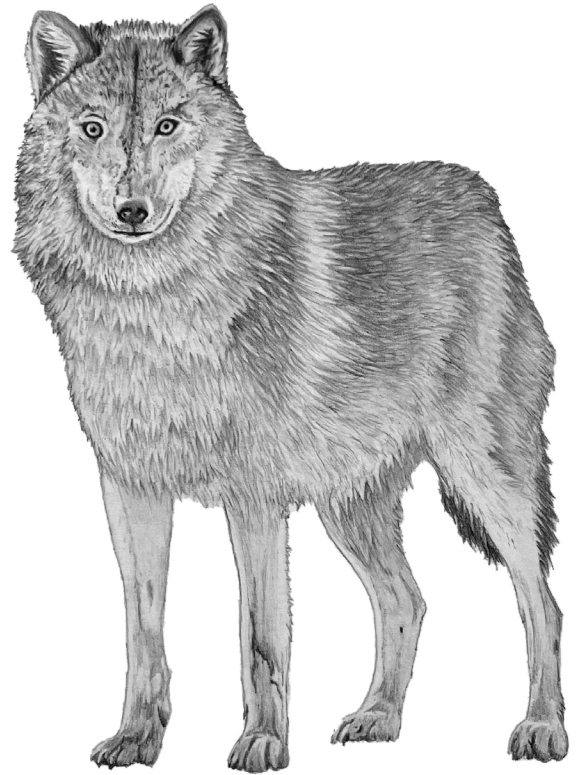
Robert Firth, Bellevue Farm overseer in 1865 and 1866, never reported any encounters with predators. In less than a decade, British and American residents of San Juan had wiped out the island’s predator and large wildlife populations.”

Despite their intrinsic value and ecological roles, wolves in the U.S. are trapped in a relentless “predator pendulum,” swinging between protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) to brutal persecution when delisted. Each time federal protections are lifted, wolves face mass killings.

In 2021, Wisconsin authorized a wolf hunt just one month after wolves were removed from the ESA, resulting in the loss of 20% of the state’s wolf population in under 72 hours. In the Northern Rocky Mountain region, wolves endure ongoing persecution following federal delisting in 2012. States like Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming have implemented aggressive hunting and trapping programs, further threatening these essential and family-oriented animals.

Between 2020 and 2024, the death toll for gray wolves in these states totaled 2,961.

These figures may only scratch the surface. Scientists believe unreported and illegal killings are widespread.



*Gray Wolf*

Here in Washington State, The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) documented 36 wolf mortalities in 2023, including:

- Two wolves were removed by the WDFW in response to conflicts with livestock.
- Five wolves were killed by vehicles.
- 22 wolves were legally harvested by tribal hunters.
- One wolf was killed by a cougar.
- Four wolves were killed illegally, and the deaths are still under investigation.

“Wolves are sentient beings, not merely objects to be moved here and there and slaughtered with impunity as if they aren’t impacted by what happens to them. Surely being trapped and relocated and their families being killed wreaks havoc with how wolves feel and deeply compromises their individual well-being.”

### **Sources and quotes:**

- Russel Barsh, Kwiaht; personal emails
- [\*San Juan Island National Historical Park: An Environmental History\*](#) by Christine Avery, 2004
- Washington Gray Wolf Conservation and Management 2023 Annual Report
- Project Coyote; online posts
- Mark Bekoff, Professor of Ecology; online posts



*Beaver*

“Beaver pairs show up sporadically in the islands but people are unkind to them.” — Russel Barsh

Beavers are a keystone species—that is, a species who other species in an ecosystem largely depend on, and if the species is removed from the ecosystem, that ecosystem changes dramatically.

Beavers act as “ecosystem engineers,” with their dam-building activities fostering landscapes that support water retention, biodiversity, and resilience.

Beaver dams create wetlands that serve as habitats for a diverse array of plant and animal species, including fish, amphibians, birds, and insects. Wetlands are among the most biodiverse and productive ecosystems in the world, supporting numerous species at various stages of their life cycles.

Beaver ponds act as natural filters, trapping sediments, pollutants, and nutrients that would otherwise flow downstream. This helps improve water quality by reducing turbidity and nutrient loads, which in turn benefits aquatic species.

These ponds create cool, slow-moving waters that provide ideal habitat for fish species, such as salmon and trout, particularly during the hot summer months when water levels in streams can become low.

Intense beaver trapping in the Pacific Northwest began around the early 1800s with the establishment of the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC), which established trading posts throughout the Pacific Northwest. The HBC, a British company, promoted aggressive trapping policies, including a “fur desert” strategy, which sought to trap out beaver populations along certain routes to deter American trappers from expanding further west.

Native Americans often participated in the fur trade, trading beaver pelts for European goods like metal tools and blankets. This initially brought new resources but gradually led to significant cultural and ecological disruptions. Tribes like the Chinook, Nez Perce, and various Coast Salish peoples were involved in trade with Europeans and Americans.

The fur trade caused an estimated 80-90% decline in beaver populations across North America by the mid-19th century. This drastic reduction was due to intense trapping to meet the high demand for beaver pelts in Europe, especially during the 17th to early 19th centuries.

In the Pacific Northwest specifically, beaver populations were heavily impacted in a relatively short period. The Hudson's Bay Company trapped beavers to the point of local extinction, drastically reducing beaver numbers across large areas. By the 1840s, beaver populations in much of the Pacific Northwest were severely depleted, with many areas no longer able to sustain commercial trapping operations.

Exact figures are difficult to determine due to limited historical population data, however, the overall impact of the fur trade on beavers across North America and the Pacific Northwest was profound. The ecological consequences were and still are significant, as beaver wetlands and ponds were lost on a massive scale, leading to lasting changes in water systems and habitat conditions across the continent.

Locally, beavers are now rare. Russel Barsh from Kwiaht documented a pair on Cypress in the 'aughties but they were trapped and released elsewhere because they flooded the main trail from Cypress Head. A pair on Waldron survived several years until they developed a taste for young apple trees and were eradicated in about 2006. A pair who took up residence on Orcas and began raising the level of Killebrew Lake in 2011 were eradicated by Public Works as the water was going to impact a phone system switch.

One beaver was found on Lopez in 2023; unfortunately the beaver had been killed by a car.

## Sources

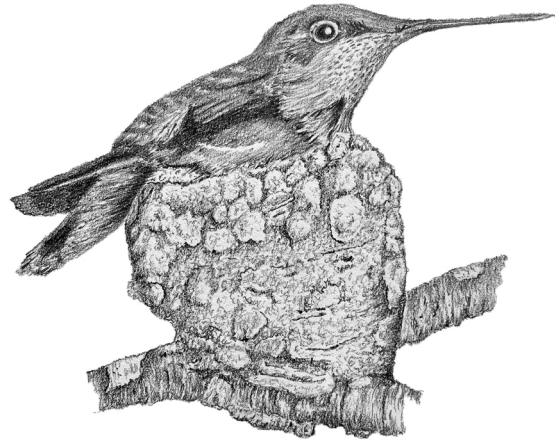
- Russel Barsh, Kwiaht; personal emails
- *Empire of the Beaver* by Michael Williams
- *Eager: the surprising, secret life of beavers and why they matter* by Ben Goldfarb



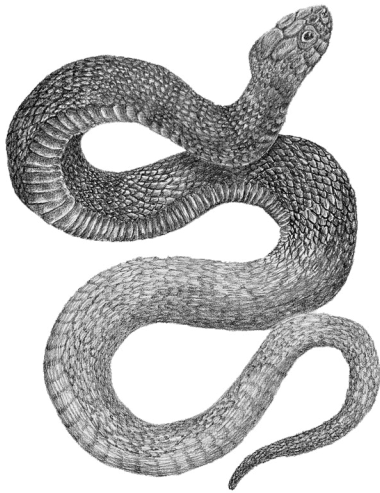
In the spring and fall, the roads of Lopez are covered in the dead bodies of newts, snakes, frogs, slugs, and probably others who I don't know. On a walk in late October, 2024, when I took this photo, I saw five flattened newts in just 1/2 mile of road.



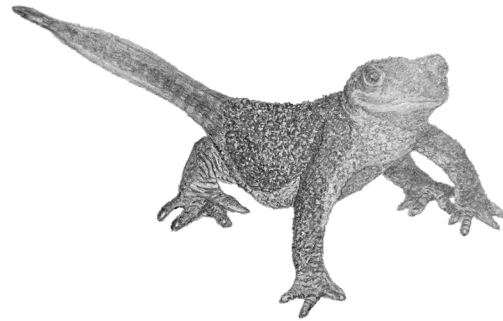
*Black Tailed Deer*



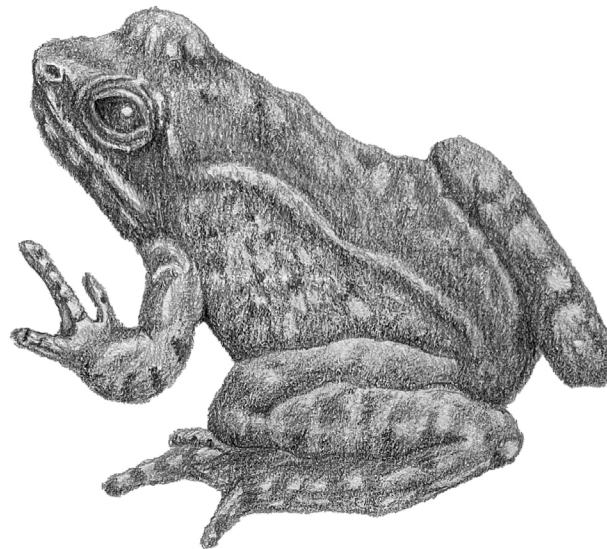
*Anna's Hummingbird*



*Garter Snake*



*Rough-skinned Newt*



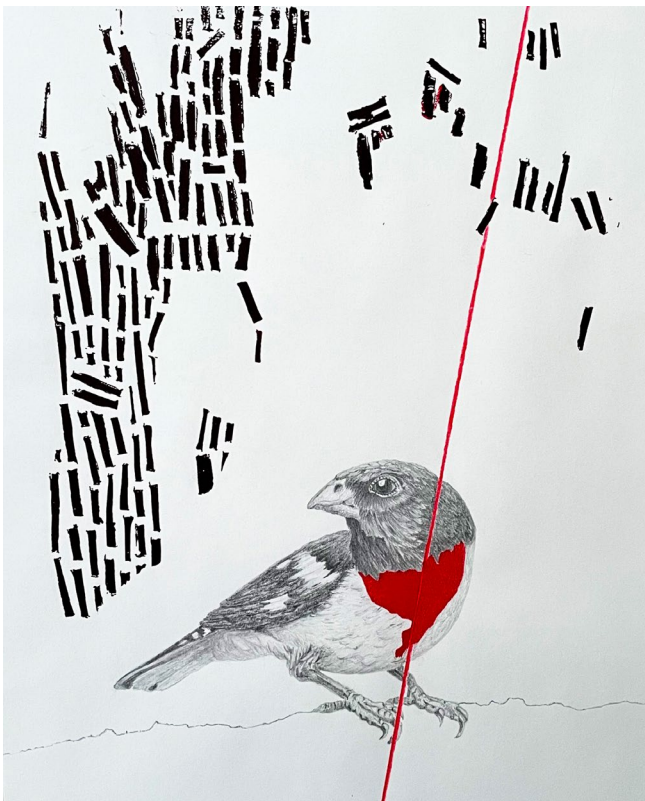
*Pacific Tree Frog*



*Long-eared Bat*



*Swallowtail Butterfly*



*Black-headed Grosbeak*

On one of my regular walking loops, every spring I heard black-headed grosbeaks singing at one roadside woodland. Their song is a whistled warble that's similar to a robin's, but longer, sweeter, and more varied. In 2024, at the beginning of spring, OPALCO utterly destroyed this habitat. I never heard them sing here again. If I'd known the previous year it would be the very last time I'd hear them sing, I would have wished them well.

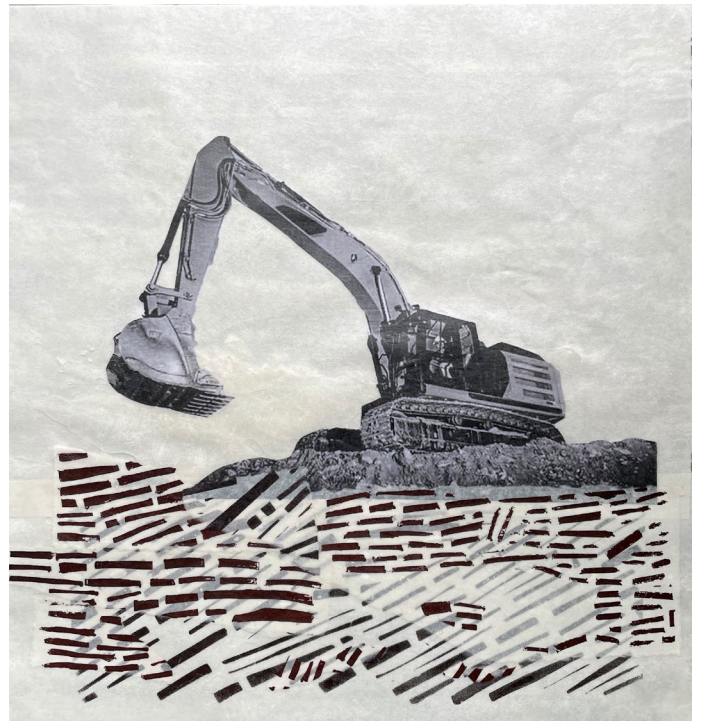




*What bulldozers do, 1*



*What bulldozers do, 2*

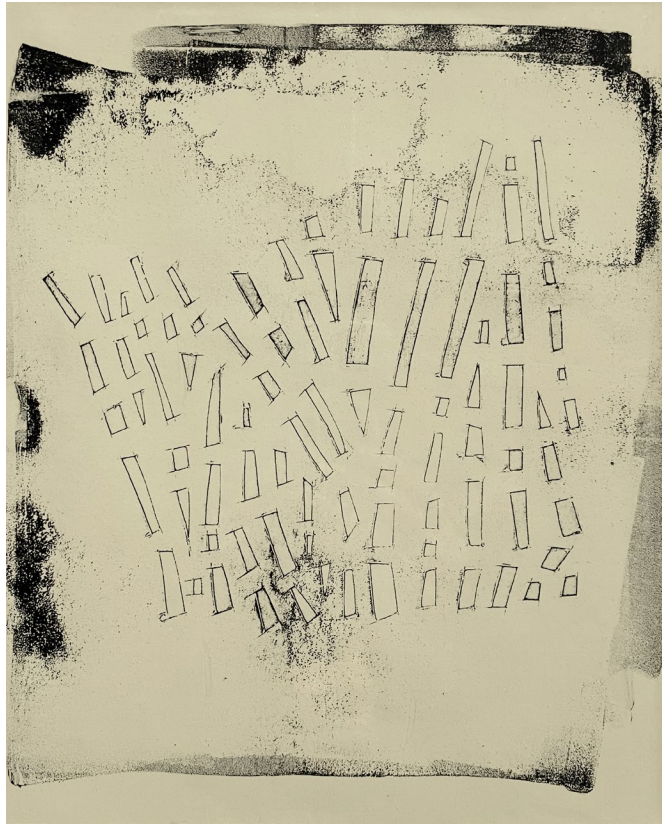




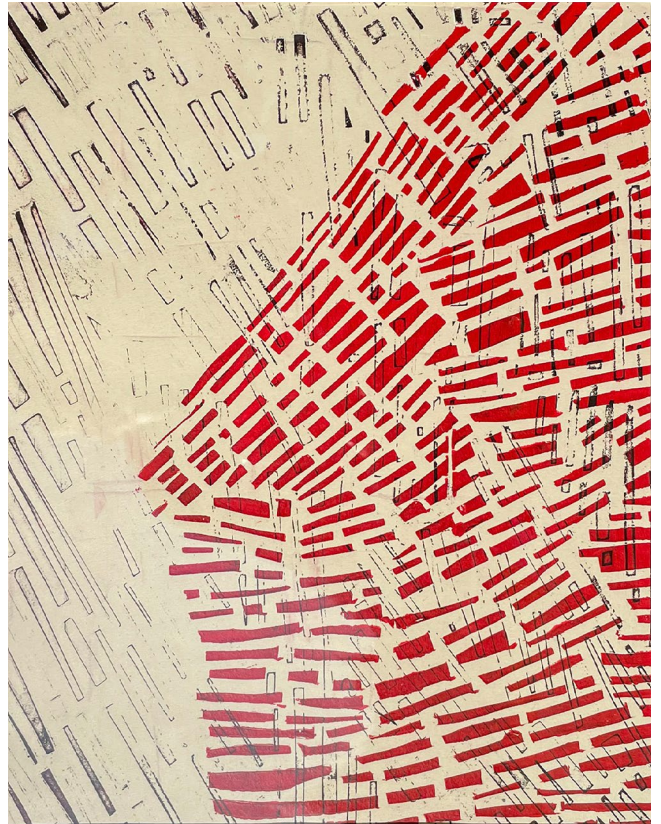
*Broken, 1*



*Broken, 2*



*Broken, 3*



*Broken, 4*

A reminder that just a few centuries ago this time of year every meadow in the islands would be reverberating with the sounds of elk bugling and wolves howling. Beavers would be bracing their dams against the coming rains. Bears would be fattening on abalone, berries, and beached whale carcasses.

The people would be preserving hundreds of tons of Chinook, Saskatoon berries, and venison, along with dozens of other foods and medicine. They'd be harvesting cedar bark and dog wool, and scrapping hides in preparation for a winter full of projects, warm and dry inside their massive long houses, far larger than any buildings here today. Columns of smoke would be rising here and there from the shoreline as clams were smoked, harpoon shafts were straightened, and the skins of rawhide drums shrunk tight.

Not long ago there were many inhabitants here that didn't just call this place home, they made it their home. Their home was their religion, their home was their meaning, and their home was their survival. And for many it still is those things, but now coupled with unfathomable grief

We would do well to remember our home is our survival too. But so long as we continue to live in isolation from all these things, we will eventually join them at the end of that long list of things that are no longer here.

— Nathan Donnelly, San Juan Island, fall 2024

From January 15, 2024 until the end of the month, you are invited to erase this drawing of a black bear. The bear was drawn over 3 weeks; his erasure mirrors the decline of species throughout the world, with wildlife numbers dropping 73% in just the past 50 years due to habitat loss from human industrial development and agriculture.

As you erase, ponder the following questions:

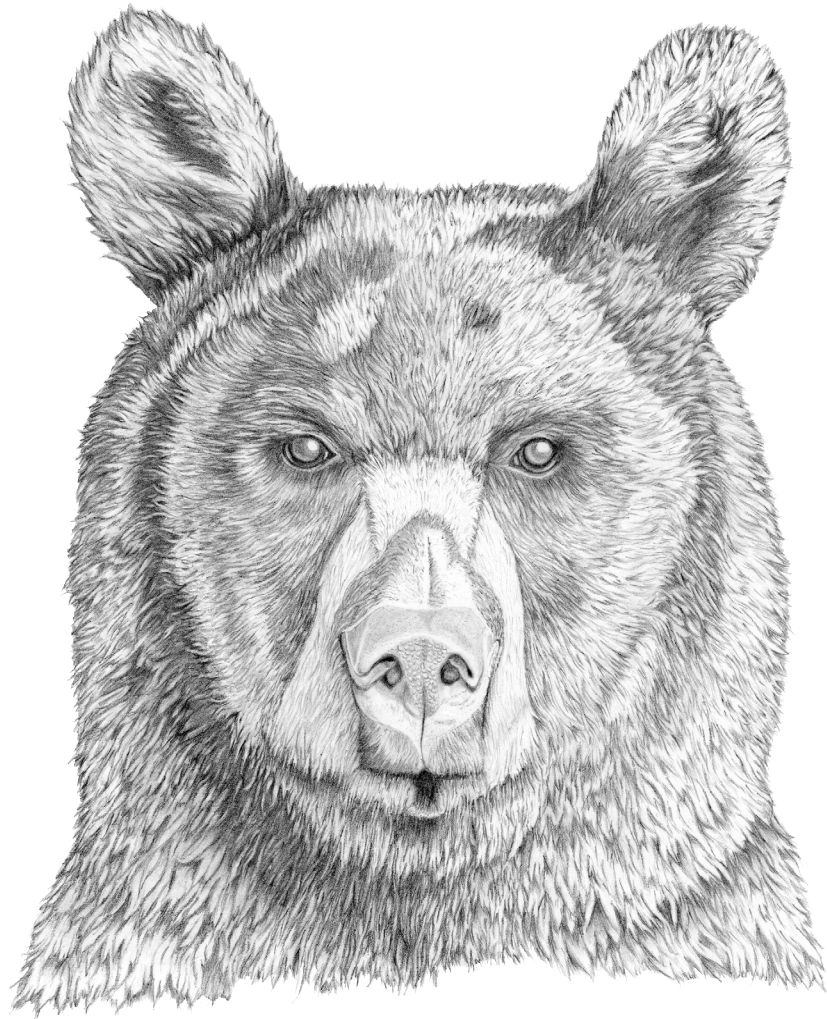
- How do you feel about the eradication of wildlife?
- How do you contribute to their decline?
- What might you change to help protect the natural world?
- How might you foster a deeper connection with nature?

The act of erasing this bear highlights the urgent need for wildlife conservation and habitat preservation here in Lopez Island, in San Juan County, and around the world.

Instructions:

Take an eraser to erase as little or as much of the bear as you like. Will your impact be small, or large?

The artist takes full responsibility for all damages to the bear.



*The Bear*

*PDF available on request.*