

Solitude in the name of science

Secluded mountain man has kept records of surroundings for decades

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GOthic — Billy Barr says he's a voyeur at heart, a nosy neighbor who pries into the habits of others: the marmots, ground squirrels, robins, foxes and sundry creatures that take over this biological research station during the off-season.

Barr has a field biologist's keen eye for detail and a consuming passion for careful record-keeping that borders on the obsessive — a trait he blames on his training as an accountant.

"I organize things and write things down. My own nature tends to be anal," said Barr, 55, business manager at the Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory in Gothic, a former mining town north of Crested Butte that has been turned into research station.

"Once I started writing stuff down, it made sense to continue writing it down, year after year, so you'd have the records," the bearded Barr said, his disheveled gray hair flowing past his shoulders onto a red plaid shirt.

He paused a moment and added sheepishly: "I don't have a life."

Actually, Barr lives an unconventional — some might say hermitic — but oddly appealing off-season life in Gothic.

When the university researchers and their students leave the lab at summer's end, Barr begins months of self-imposed exile, living alone in a house he built on a one-acre riverside site at the north end of town.

Solar panels and underwater generators, which use the force of the river's current to turn propeller blades, provide electricity. A spring supplies drinking water. And a greenhouse garden yields onions, tomatoes, lettuce, carrots, bok choy, spinach and other greens that help him get through the long winter.

The four-mile dirt road to Crested Butte isn't plowed during the winter (and Barr doesn't own a car anyway), so the only way in or out is by snowshoes or skis.

So he spends a lot of time alone: observing, measuring and chronicling.

Barr spent his first full Gothic winter in 1973-74 and hasn't missed one since. During that span, he's maintained detailed daily weather records and observations of some two dozen animals and plants. In addition, the Colorado Avalanche Information Center has relied on his snowslide observations since 1976.

In the spring of that year, Barr began recording the date when the first town marmots emerge from their winter hibernation burrows. This unique data package allowed University of Maryland ecologist David Inouye to spot a correlation between warming April temperatures and increasingly early spring marmot emergence.

That insight led to a research paper published in the prestigious *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. Barr was credited as a co-author. He prefers to use lower-case B's when writing his name, but the journal wouldn't allow it.

"He's a great weather observer and a great avalanche observer and a great observer of lots of things," said research climatologist Nolan Doesken of the Colorado Climate Center. "He's very meticulous.

"A data set like he's got there is one of those rare and unusual gold mines, where you have multiple observations that have been done in a similar way over a long period of time," Doesken said.

Barr first visited Gothic as a Rutgers University undergraduate in the summer of 1972. He was working on an East River water-quality project for his environmental science degree.

He returned to New Jersey that fall to finish the degree. But by the fall of 1973 he was back at Gothic for good.

For several years, he supported himself by fighting wildfires in the summer and doing various odd jobs: maintenance, dishwashing, library work. He bought his one-acre plot from a ranching family in 1979 and landed the business manager's job at the lab a year later.

Barr and two friends built his home in 1980 — it's heated by a wood-burning stove and passive solar in the winter — a quarter mile from his lab office. Sixteen years later, he added an extra room: a cozy home theater with a single seat, a 9-by-5-foot screen and nine speakers.

Barr owns more than 1,200 movies on DVD and videotape, and he writes reviews that he posts on the Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory Web site. (To read them, go to www.rmbl.org, click on "Gothic weather," then scroll to the bottom of the page.)

"I watch a movie every single night, all year round," he said. "It's a little excessive."

His favorite films include *When Harry Met Sally* and *The Princess Bride*.

Watching movies, watching nature and writing it all down. That's how Billy Barr spends much of the off-season. And that's just fine with the scientists trying to track long-term climatic and biological trends near Crested Butte.

"For me, it was curiosity. That's all," Barr said of his observations and records. "In winter, there's not a lot else going on around here."

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