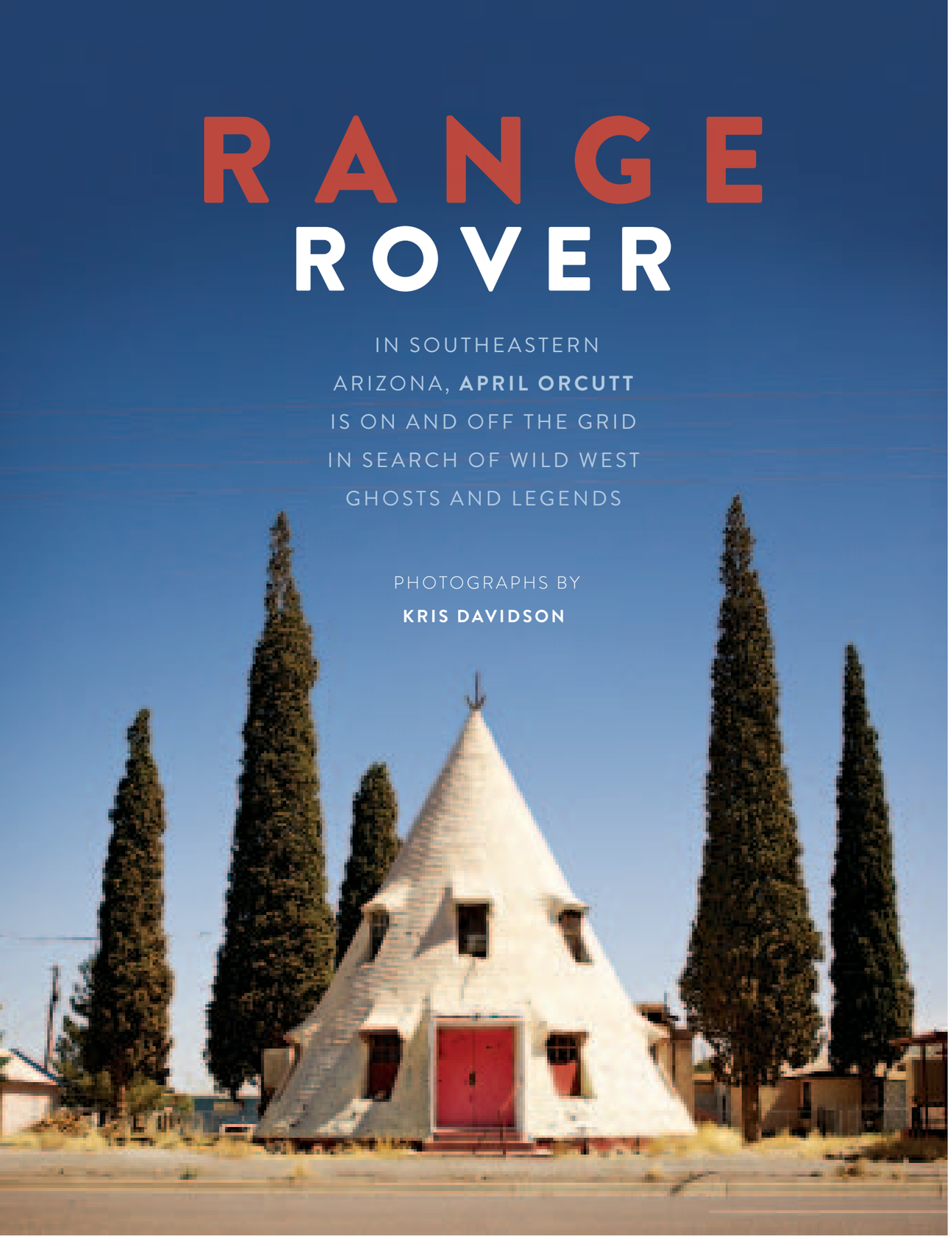
RANGE ROVER

IN SOUTHEASTERN ARIZONA, **APRIL ORCUTT** IS ON AND OFF THE GRID IN SEARCH OF WILD WEST GHOSTS AND LEGENDS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
KRIS DAVIDSON



Drayson Harris and his herding dogs make the rounds at his Rough Mountain Ranch. A tepee in stucco (opposite) stands out in Bowie, Arizona.

"I'VE BEEN IN LOVE WITH

the American West since I was two years old," says Burt Webster, his beard a weathered shade of gray. "I have a photograph of me at age three holding a Gene Autry guitar." I take a photo of him now on a stool by a dirt-lined street. These days he looks like a 19th-century undertaker, in a brocade vest and black-and-white ascot, but with an anachronistic flair: aviator sunglasses. Webster goes on to recount how he hitchhiked here from Long Island in 1987—like so many misfits before him, taking refuge north of the Mule Mountains in southeastern Arizona. That's where I meet him, in the town with the wildest of Wild West reputations, Tombstone.

A dozen other men dressed as cowpunchers (leather vests, chaps, Stetsons) strut the boardwalks fronting saloons the likes of which catered to silver miners and cattlemen 130 years ago. Webster sells tickets for the "Gunfight at the O.K. Corral." The daily restaging of this infamous 30-second shoot-out happens a half block from the lot where in 1881 Virgil, Morgan, and Wyatt Earp plus Doc Holliday got into a gunfight with three young cowboys, who ended up dead.

There's no blaze of gunfire chasing me to the back roads of Arizona's Cochise County, where southeastern Arizona meets New and old Mexico, and the wind blows hard through bizarre rock hoodoos and swirls dry-lake sand into dust devils. "Sky island" mountains adrift in seas of desert grassland have long provided cover for all manner of outliers, from Johnny Ringo to Geronimo. Cougars and even rare ocelots and jaguars prowl out of sight; hummingbirds flit among desert wildflowers.

Like those winged migrants, I too have traveled nearly a thousand miles to get here. I'm on a quest to discover the secret of this alluring place that harbored steely warriors but also propels delicate hummingbirds across harsh desert.

Webster is a persuasive salesman, but a staged shoot-'em-up isn't exactly what I have in mind, so I duck into Big Nose Kate's Saloon for what I hope will be a quiet lunch. No dice. A duo belts out a country-and-western sound track while a clutch of men in cowboy hats shout over one another at the bar. Red curtains with gold fringe frame the windows, and American flags, wagon wheels, cattle skulls, and a bawdy painting or two cover the walls. "People like heroes and clear lines between good guys and bad guys, like in old Western movies," says Steve Goldstein, owner of Kate's. "That's why people like Tombstone."

I'm seeking a retreat with more nuance than a spaghetti Western, so it's clear I'll need to veer off the tourist track. As I head east out of Tombstone, the byway undulates through the golden mesquite and creosote hills, the Dragoon Mountains on the horizon. A few cattle amble along. I pull into Gleeson, a town of a thousand in its glory days of turquoise and copper mining. It's the first truly deserted town along the Ghost Town Trail.

Triangle T Ranch's saloon harks back to the days of swinging doors (above). The Chiricahuas define Cochise County's horizon (opposite).

Outliving Gleeson's residents are its tall tales, with one particularly hard-to-swallow bit of trivia claiming that Tiffany & Co. operated a turquoise mine here. All I find is a small cemetery, a jail turned community center (for what community, I couldn't say), and a bleakness that suffuses these few scattered adobe remnants. My own restless spirit urges me to move along.

The drive weaves among more mesquite-dotted hills. The abandoned town of Courtland is so well hidden, I miss it entirely. Or maybe I'm distracted by the views west to the Dragoons and east nearly 40 miles to the snowcapped Chiricahuas. When I enter Pearce, I count five refurbished wooden buildings—two homes and three stores—but no people. The Old Store's door is wide-open, so I peruse the merchandise: used dining chairs, period lanterns, and rusted household implements. There goes my fantasy of uncovering an overlooked nugget from the nearby gold mine.

Across the street at Old Pearce Pottery, which looks like an attic filled with shelves of ceramic dishware, I encounter the town's only palpable sign of life: owner and potter Patricia Burris carefully wrapping up a quail-shaped teabag holder. In this town cloaked in numbing silence, her chipperness is disarming—and a relief.

Continuing my drive, I enter the Dragoons through the narrow canyon of Cochise Stronghold, where Chief Cochise and his band of the Chiricahua Apache hid from the military in the 1860s. Vistas from these granite spires gave Apache sentries an advantage: They could spot anyone approaching from far away. For nine years Cochise and his people evaded the cavalry here.

Make their day: Reenactors walk through Tombstone.

THE NEXT MORNING I hike the trail twisting into the limestone gorges and around the granite spires of the canyon with local guide Randy Redhawk, an affable mountain man with shoulder-length red hair and a russet beard. Redhawk studied ancestral ceremonies with the Chiricahua Apache, sweat-lodge rituals with the Lakota, and traditions with a Diné (Navajo) medicine man.

"When I first entered Cochise Stronghold," Redhawk tells me, "I knew I was home." On that day 20 years ago, a vision quest called him to change his last name to Redhawk and to spend all four seasons deep in these mountains. "That realization was one of the most profound experiences of my life," he says. For 12 months in a cave refuge in the Dragoons, he subsisted on rice and beans as well as foraged edibles—mesquite pods, acorns, prickly pear cactus, piñon pine nuts. "I was in heaven," he says, sharing his story with such warmth and conviction I'm convinced, at least for the moment, that living off cactus in a cave is perfectly normal. Now Redhawk lives in a solar-powered, wood-and-glass hogan he built by hand. When he tells me about the time he came face-to-face with a mountain lion, he speaks so evenly I imagine both man and beast politely shrugged and turned back their own way.

We follow the trail deeper into the canyon, the rugged rock walls giving way to smoother boulders stacked one upon another that Redhawk calls "rock people." To me they look like stern giants guarding the stronghold's caverns and arroyos, one of which is said to contain the hidden remains of Chief Cochise.

I CROSS SULPHUR SPRINGS VALLEY and drive up another sky island, the Chiricahua Mountains. As I ascend Bonita Canyon Drive in Chiricahua National Monument, more and more volcanic pillars and balanced rhyolite boulders line the side canyons. I see in them noble faces, gentlemen wearing gray tweed hats, and gigantic stacks of peach-colored flapjacks. The Apache named this the "Land of Standing-Up Rocks." A bald eagle soars overhead. My pulse quickens: A jaguar or ocelot could lurk behind any boulder.

Bonita Canyon Drive ends at 6,870-foot Massai Point, called Yahdeshut, or "point of rocks," by the Apache. From here I look down on hundreds of hoodoos—fantastically shaped rock pillars, each 10 to 20 feet tall, filling a swatch of Rhyolite Canyon. This point's been renamed for Big Foot Massai, one of the last warriors of the Chiricahua Apache, who was chased here and disappeared into the maze of stone pillars. Some say they feel his spirit in the wind.

Looking north I feel the presence of another formidable Apache. I know that the outcropping called Cochise Head is made of rhyolite, but all I can see is Chief Cochise himself, resting in his hideout. Sunset shades the rocks a vivid vermilion. At every turn I encounter blushing faces in stone and glowing rock people discussing the day's happenings. I shake myself out of this reverie and drive on.

I HAD HOPED TO CROSS the Chiricahuas to get to Cave Creek Canyon, on the east side, by taking Pinery Canyon Road a quick 25 miles. Alas, the ranger at Chiricahua National Monument tells me snow and mud block the dirt road, so instead I must drive 129 miles around the range. No matter. I'm in good spirits, an ardent believer in a detour's promise of discovery.

As I head south through the broad valley between the Chiricahua and Mule Mountains, dots in the sky swirl in a kaleidoscope of smoke. I pull over. The swirls are thousands of sandhill cranes, resounding with a trumpeting *garoo ooo oo.* Low golden foothills lead to the scrub-strewn gray Pedregosas.

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I pass the Geronimo Surrender Monument. Tumbleweeds blow across the road. Back toward the Chiricahuas the hamlet of Portal blips by. As I round a corner, Cave Creek Canyon opens wide with yellow cliffs flanking the road. Slabs of orange rock jut skyward over foothills mottled with pine, juniper, and oak trees. Caves pock the cliffs, which frame distant snowy peaks.

"OUR HOODOOS are more angular than those in Chiricahua National Monument," says Reed Peters in the library-like lobby of his Cave Creek Ranch lodge, outside Portal. His face is angular, too, and his local knowledge deep, imparting a sense that he forms part of this place. He's explaining how this region marks the overlap of plants and animals from the Rocky Mountains, the Sierra Madre, and the Sonoran and Chihuahuan Deserts. "This is why," he says, "the area has the greatest diversity of reptiles, bats, butterflies, and birds of any land on the continent." Some 165 bird species have been spotted at the ranch.

That richness has kept fellow guest Narca Moore-Craig, an accomplished artist who lives in Portal, busy for some 20 years. She's a diminutive outdoorswoman, fortified in hat and gloves that block the sun. "One spring I saw several Chiricahua Apache coming out from the South Fork Trail carrying drums," she tells me as we chat near red hummingbird feeders shaped like saucers. "I asked what they were doing. They said they were drumming for their ancestors."

Late spring, she goes on, is also when bird-watchers flock to Cave Creek Canyon to search for elegant trogons, which fly north from Mexico and Central America and nest in cozy cavities here, like those in the twisting branches of the mottled sycamores lining the streambeds.

All the while she talks, I can't take my eyes off the hummingbirds darting around the feeders. Noticing my trance, Peters brags that 14 hummingbird species visit the Chiricahuas. "Some blue-throated hummingbirds, which are listed in bird books as migrants," he says, "have become year-round residents."

As I sit on a bench near the feeders, mesmerized by the acrobatic flights of these creatures, I can understand their decision to stay in this exquisite canyon. "You be careful," Peters says. "You might be lured to stay here, too."

APRIL ORCUTT, a lover of the open road, has owned four Volkswagen buses. **KRIS DAVIDSON** shot a Florida Keys drive for the December 2012/January 2013 issue.

THE INSIDER

Cochise County, Arizona

WHERE TO EAT

At 1880s-style **Big Nose Kate's Saloon** in Tombstone, menu items such as the Madame's meat-lover pizza pay naughty tribute to Kate, Doc Holliday's girlfriend and a local prostitute. **Margie's Corner Cafe,** near Pearce, feels like Margie's kitchen table (in a good way). **Portal Peak Lodge, Store & Cafe** offers Mexican food, beer, hard lemonade, and books by locals.

A hummingbird at Cave Creek Ranch

WHERE TO STAY

Cochise Stronghold B&B has a casita, a ten-person yurt, and a secluded yurt for meditation. Breakfast means mesquite pancakes or chiles rellenos soufflé. Down the road from Johnny Ringo's grave, **Sunglow Ranch**'s upscale casitas feature hand-painted murals of endemic wildlife like butterflies and geckos. Adventure options range from mountain biking to hot-tubbing. Knotty-pine and stone walls enhance the rustic appeal of **Cave Creek Ranch,** where rooms come equipped with kitchens, and maps and guidebooks fill the lobby.

WHEN TO GO

Visit in winter for sandhill cranes, late summer for hummingbirds, and spring for wildflowers. Pack for unpredictable weather conditions.

WHAT TO READ & WATCH

Birds of Southeastern Arizona, by Richard Cachor Taylor, is an innovative field guide that plots species by elevation. In the classic Western flick ***Broken Arrow*** (1950), Jimmy Stewart negotiates peace between settlers and the Apache. The movie is based on Elliott Arnold's novel ***Blood Brother,*** which was inspired by county history.

INTERNATIONAL MAPPING