



# SCARY ENOUGH

**WHEN YOU VISIT THE NEW GRAND TETON VISITOR CENTER,  
REASSURANCE IS NOT PART OF THE PLAN.**

BY BRADFORD MCKEE / PHOTOGRAPHY BY NIC LEHOUX

Jackson Hole in Wyoming, even with the private jets constantly coming and going and the increasing direct commercial service from Atlanta and Newark, New Jersey, to the small airport, is an easy enough place to look around and feel good and lost. There are a lot of sage and cottonwoods standing around; the Snake River turns up everywhere; and, of course, as Albert Bierstadt would have it, there are those crazy peaks over on the left. The place is about as gorgeous as it gets. You could never tire of looking down the valley, with so much life layered around it in what seems the most idealized and beautiful forms. There are the wetlands, the meadows, the sage, the forests, and the alpine heights crunched into a very limited area between the peaks on one side and the hills on the other. The valley is the West in miniature.

It is so wonderful, in fact, that about two and a half million people come each year to Grand Teton National Park, which covers 310,000 acres between Yellowstone National Park and the town of Jackson. Recently the National Park Service built a new visitor center near the south entrance to the park, where people can go to orient themselves. The center sits between a sweeping sage meadow and the bank of the Snake, backed nearly into a forest of cottonwood, aspen, and spruce. For the building, the park service called on the architect Peter Bohlin. He has done for the visitors what he would likely do for a rustic billionaire—a modern pavilion dominated by the presence of logs, long eaves, full-length skirts of glass, and its share of dramatic shifts and tilts in the wall planes. Inside, there are exhibitions about the Teton wilderness and a huge fireplace to make people feel at home. The gift shop sells a handsome monograph about the building and the exhibits.

Nowhere in the monograph do you find much information about the landscape right around the building, which is perplexing because the only reason the building exists is to launch people into the sublime outdoors. You don't cross Wyoming to see a visitor center, pleasant as it is. The visitor center landscape was designed by Barbara Swift, ASLA, and her firm, Swift Company LLC, of Seattle, which you may learn in a notation small enough to miss in the monograph. Swift's work on the site is remarkable because it is so very recessive, and there is more to its making than anyone will likely know because the place looks so, you know, undone. There are two spaces that extend the building, a central Zenlike courtyard on the forest side and a slightly raised terrace that faces the meadow and the mountains, where Bohlin's and Swift's firms collaborated on the designs. Apart from those areas, if you don't count the paving of the parking lot, Swift's landscape looks as wild as any random part of the park before it melts off into the cottonwood shade beyond it, and the wind and the birds whistle through much the same.

**OPPOSITE**

Between a parking lot and the visitor center, a path goes through a forest of cottonwood and spruce.







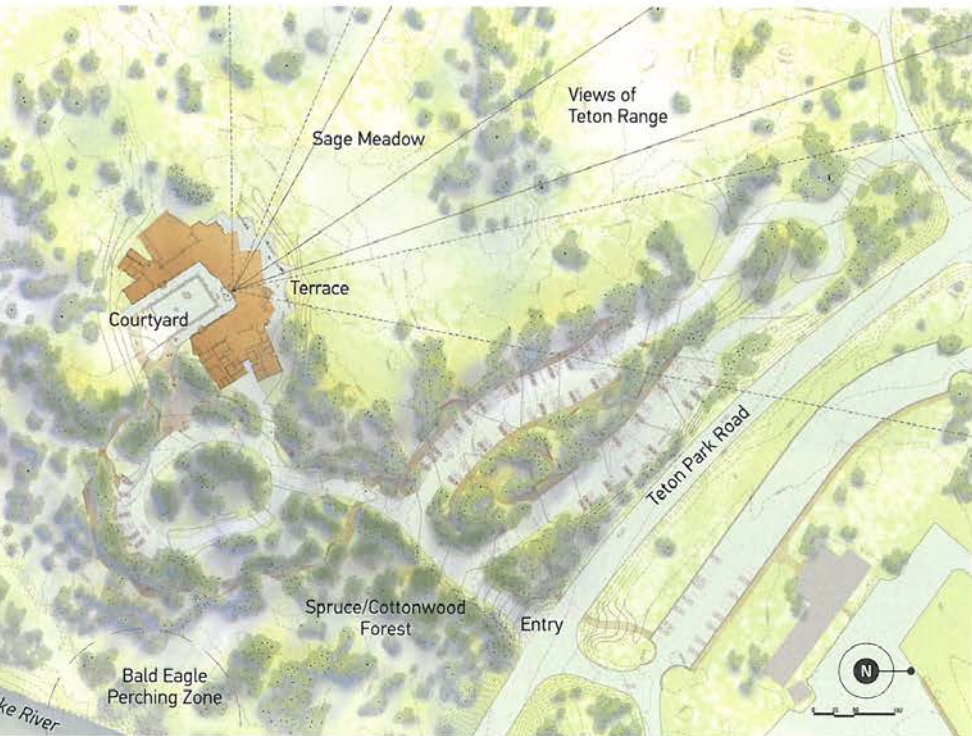


“We want people to feel slightly afraid there,” Swift told me. (I walked the site on my own.) “We want their animalness to be engaged.” That is harder than it might have been had the main parking lot been placed farther away from the building, as Swift recommended in an early site selection process. Park service officials, however, committed as they are to immersing people in a spectacular wild place, seem to doubt that most visitors would enjoy walking more than a couple of hundred feet from their car to the center. Which is odd, and too bad. So for that quick walk, Swift designed the distance in ways that would engross people as much as possible in the singular Teton ecology. You have to remember that most of the roads that lead to the park move at 40 miles per hour or faster, and the scenes fly by fast and change constantly. So when people arrive at the visitor center, having stared off at the mountains a good while, Swift wants them to absorb things at closer range, to force visitors into a “very slow” acquaintance, she says. “You get out of your car and walk away from the predominant view and into that spruce-cottonwood forest, and it is a very arresting and powerful experience.”

What you see in the open is a seemingly natural profusion of grasses—needlegrass, Hood’s sedge, slender wheatgrass, and several others—along with yarrow, balsamroot, pussytoes, and a wild geranium, depending on the time of year. There are too many wildflowers to count in all the chaos. All of the plants replaced on the site had originated there in some way, as did all the soil and duff used in putting the site back together. As part of the revegetation where the ground was trampled by construction, the site was “almost hermetically sealed,” as Swift describes it. To keep the gene pool of the site strictly local, new plantings

**OPPOSITE**  
The center sits well below the treetops in Teton Valley.

**ABOVE**  
The austere courtyard has a snowmelt system; all of the melt recharges the groundwater.



## PLANT LIST

### TREES

- Abies bifolia* (Subalpine fir)
- Picea pungens* (Colorado blue spruce)
- Pinus contorta* (Lodgepole pine)
- Populus angustifolia* (Narrowleaf cottonwood)
- Populus tremuloides* (Quaking aspen)

### SHRUBS

- Amelanchier alnifolia* (Serviceberry)
- Artemisia tridentata* (Wyoming big sagebrush)
- Berberis repens* (Oregon grape)
- Purshia tridentata* (Antelope bitterbrush)
- Ribes cereum* (Wax currant)
- Rosa woodsii* (Woods' rose)
- Shepherdia canadensis* (Russet buffaloberry)
- Symphoricarpos oreophilus* (Mountain snowberry)

### FORBS

- Achillea millefolium* (Yarrow)
- Antennaria* spp. (Pussytoes)
- Balsamorhiza sagittata* (Arrowleaf balsamroot)
- Campanula rotundifolia* (Common harebell)
- Eriogonum umbellatum* (Sulphur-flower buckwheat)
- Festuca idahoensis* (Idaho fescue)
- Fragaria virginiana* (Virginia strawberry)
- Galium* spp. (Bedstraw)
- Geranium viscosissimum* (Sticky purple geranium)
- Helianthella quinquenervis* (Fivenerve helianthella)
- Helianthella uniflora* (Oneflower helianthella)
- Lupinus argenteus* (Silvery lupine)
- Lupinus sericeus* (Silky lupine)
- Penstemon procerus* (Littleflower penstemon)
- Stipa comata* (Needle and thread)

### GRASS SEED

- Bromus marginatus* (Mountain brome)
- Carex hoodii* (Hood's sedge)
- Elymus glaucus* (Blue wildrye)
- Elymus trachycaulus* (Slender wheatgrass)
- Koeleria macrantha* (Prairie junegrass)
- Stipa nelsonii* (Needlegrass)

### FORB SEED

- Aster* spp. (Aster)
- Delphinium nuttallii* (Upland larkspur)
- Delphinium occidentale* (Western larkspur)
- Frasera speciosa* (Green gentian)
- Potentilla gracilis* (Cinquefoil)
- Viguiera multiflora* (Showy goldeneye)

came from transplants, seeds, or cuttings taken off this very ground and nursed along by a contract grower for what was to be a two-year period during construction. The grower, however, had business problems, “so a bit of a disaster occurred,” Swift says dryly, the way she says almost everything. “It resulted in fewer plants.” Only she might know the difference.

The same goes for the subtle rippling of the ground beneath the meadow; most people likely won't notice it. The topography results from periods of flooding on the Snake River and the soil deposition and erosion that occur with it. There are gentle swales that cross the land where Swift has directed stormwater away from the building, parking, and road surfaces for infiltration. During the project, park service staff came and went, which meant at one point, deep into the design process, that Swift found herself fending off a retrograde strategy for managing stormwater, as if a gentler approach of working with those swales had never been considered. “We successfully fought that,” she says, so the water serves the habitat in much the way it always had.

It's surprising that Swift and her team weren't wearing neck braces as they finished the project. Through what sounds like an awful lot of second- and third-guessing, she kept one mantra out front: Do not domesticate the place. She stuck close to what she perceived as the aspiration of the client's original team, which was to embed the visitors as fully as possible in this

### OPPOSITE

All plants on the visitor center site were replanted from seeds, cuttings, or transplants taken from it.









extraordinary place for the short time they're here. Of course, close to the building there are two places that have been tamed. One is the calm, flat courtyard braced on three sides by the deep portico and its impressive log columns, because every park center needs an event space, and if a couple of spellbinding glacial stones are available to place inside it, then live it up a little. The other is a terrace on the meadow side of the building; it is but a minor stage for taking in the sight and smell of sage as it stretches across the clearing toward a wall of forest on the west end, beyond that, the raw force of the silver mountains hung across the horizon. ●

#### Project Credits

**CLIENT/OWNERS** NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, GRAND TETON NATIONAL PARK, MOOSE, WYOMING; GRAND TETON NATIONAL PARK FOUNDATION, MOOSE, WYOMING, AND GRAND TETON ASSOCIATION, MOOSE, WYOMING. **LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT** SWIFT COMPANY LLC, SEATTLE (BARBARA SWIFT, ASLA, PRINCIPAL IN CHARGE/LEAD DESIGNER; LISA CORRY, ASLA, PROJECT MANAGER/LEAD DESIGNER; ALLISA CARLSON AND ALISON MAITLIN SCHEETZ, PROJECT TEAM). **ARCHITECT** BOHLIN CYWINSKI JACKSON, SEATTLE. **CIVIL ENGINEER** NELSON ENGINEERING, JACKSON, WYOMING. **LIGHTING DESIGN** RENFRO DESIGN GROUP INC., NEW YORK. **INTERPRETIVE DESIGN** RALPH APPLEBAUM ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK. **STRUCTURAL ENGINEER** BEAUDETTE CONSULTING ENGINEERS, INC., MISSOULA, MONTANA. **MECHANICAL, ELECTRICAL, AND PLUMBING** GORDON PRILL DRAPES, PC, GREAT FALLS, MONTANA. **SNOW COUNTRY DESIGN** MATRIX IMA, SAN FRANCISCO. **COST ESTIMATING** DAVIS LANGDON, SEATTLE. **ACOUSTICAL ENGINEERS** GREENBUSCH GROUP, SEATTLE. **GEOTECHNICAL ENGINEERS** WOMACK & ASSOCIATES, JACKSON, WYOMING. **GENERAL CONTRACTOR** INTERMOUNTAIN CONSTRUCTION INC., IDAHO FALLS, IDAHO. **LANDSCAPE SUBCONTRACTOR** PRECISION LANDSCAPING, IDAHO FALLS, IDAHO. **PLANT COLLECTION AND PROPAGATION** BITTERROOT RESTORATION INC., CORVALLIS, MONTANA.

#### OPPOSITE

A modest terrace faces northwest to a sage meadow and the Teton Range.

#### ABOVE

The courtyard opens on three sides from beneath deep eaves.