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George's Claim

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Photo by Chad Harder

The home of miner George Kornec is perched above the Mike Horse Mine. He's lived in these mountains almost all of his life.

[This article comes from the Missoula Independent.](#)

A reclusive miner was looking for gold. He found the good life.

by Matthew Frank

Oscar, a raven, keeps George Kornec company, and Kornec feeds him baloney and bread. Freddy the chipmunk visits, as does a pine squirrel that likes peanut butter so much that Kornec named him Skippy. Kornec names just about all the critters. Steller's jays congregate around the big wooden birdfeeder outside his door. Hummingbirds zip around a feeder beneath his eaves. Occasionally a mountain lion lies under the back of Kornec's old red pickup, and bears come to pilfer birdseed. Kornec insists the best way to shoo away bears, by the way, is with a broom: "They're scared to death of a damn broom," he says.

Kornec, who might just be one of the last hermits in Montana, lives with his best friend. Spunky is a 13-year-old collie with a knotty white mane and a hoarse, muffled bark, as if he smokes. But that would be Kornec, who lights his filterless Liggett Selects one after another, often using a red Coors ashtray on his

kitchen table. The laminate wood table looks like it was taken out of a bar, as do the three black vinyl chairs. A lantern and five or six flashlights sit on the table, because only a generator powers Kornec's house. The walls are yellowed from smoke. A wood-burning stove stands in the corner. There's a wooden radio and an old refrigerator, but no phone. The kitchen faucet connects to a hose that runs straight into Beartrap Creek.

"I've drank it all my life and it hasn't killed me yet," Kornec says.

Kornec is a lifelong miner. He's lived alone here for decades, on his small mining claim in the mountains between Lincoln and Rogers Pass, about 100 miles east of Missoula, purposefully unencumbered. He's one of the last small-time miners toiling in the mountains long after Montana's mining boom busted.

"I'm content up here in my private little world," he says.

Still, he gets visitors. When I first met him, back in March, I was tagging along with a Department of Environment Quality staffer who brought him chocolate-chip cookies. On a recent August visit, the propane man from Lincoln rumbled up the dirt road to top off Kornec's tank. And then an old hunting buddy Kornec hadn't seen in years popped in with his grandson to say hello and drop off a bag of birdseed. Earlier, a couple of 20-somethings in a white pickup conducting road surveys for the Forest Service had gotten turned around and found themselves on Kornec's claim; we'd left Kornec's gate, with a big "Road Closed" sign on it, open.

"I guess our maps are a little off," the driver said. "Maybe you can help us. Do you know these roads very well?"

"Real well," Kornec replied.

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