BACKCOUNTRY WYOMING

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Experience wilderness with free activities in every season

By Mead Gruver Associated Press

Wyoming is famous for Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks. But a wide valley of fragrant, gnarled sagebrush around the upper waters of the North Platte River offers another way to experience the state.

Bordered by the Sierra Madre and Medicine Bow mountains just north of the Colorado state line in southeast Wyoming, the North Platte River Valley used to be the exclusive domain of cattle ranchers descended from homesteaders. These days, the area is home to some very wealthy people — as evidenced by private jets at the tiny airport and new mansions. Annie Proulx, author of "Brokeback Mountain," a few years ago wrote a book about her sanctuary home, Bird Cloud, overlooking the river.

The valley's largest town, Saratoga, population 1,700, offers lodging, restaurants and shopping options for any budget. But there are plenty of free ways to experience the backcountry wilderness in every season, from warm-weather hikes in the vast Medicine Bow National Forest to snowshoeing and cross-country skiing followed by a soak in a hot spring as snow falls

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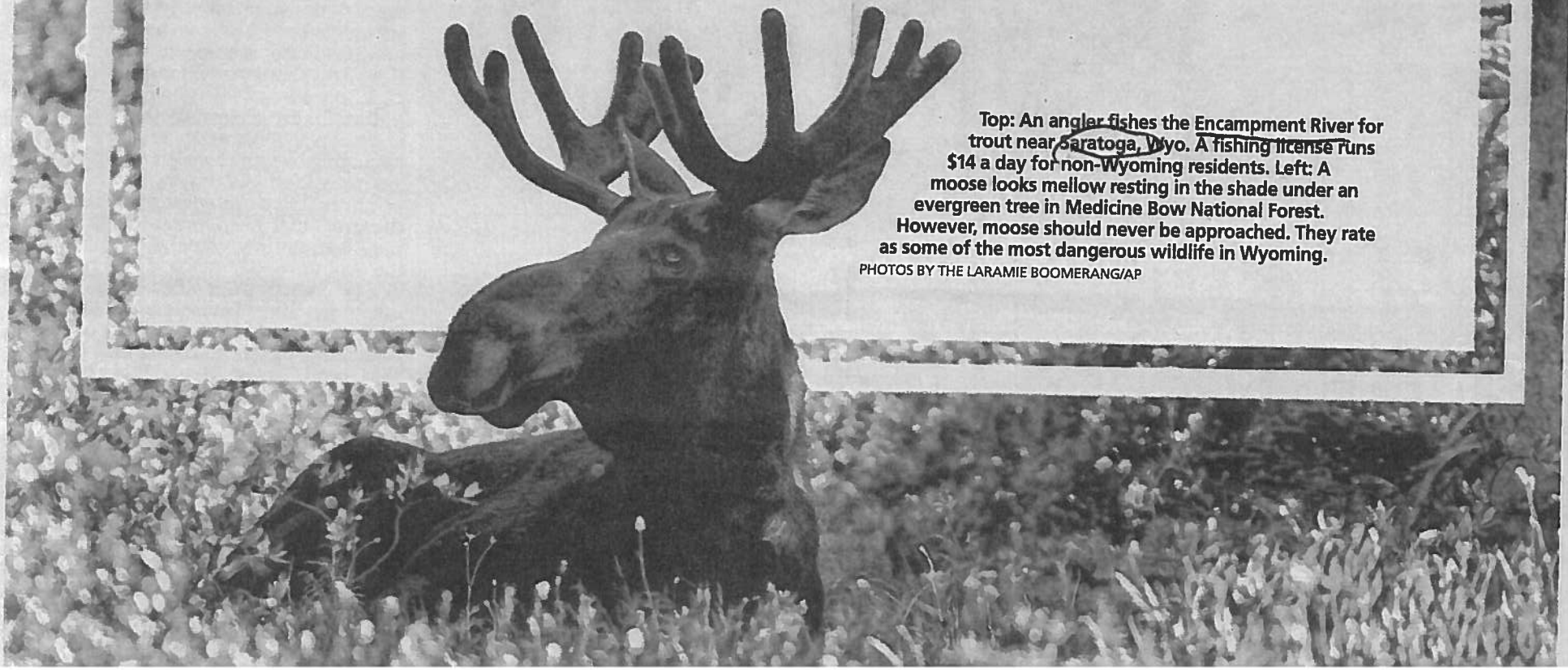

Top: An angler fishes the Encampment River for trout near Saratoga, Wyo. A fishing license runs $14 a day for non-Wyoming residents. Left: A moose looks mellow resting in the shade under an evergreen tree in Medicine Bow National Forest. However, moose should never be approached. They rate as some of the most dangerous wildlife in Wyoming.

PHOTOS BY THE LARAMIE BOOMERANG/AP