



Death by Garbage

By Bill Schneider
Illustrations by Ron Finger

How trash, dog chow, bird seed, and other food attractants along the urban interface are “killing” grizzlies and stifling the bears’ natural expansion



SOME TEENAGERS TEND TO GO A LITTLE wild at times. Pumped up with hormones, they can be fearless, believing in their invulnerability, and are often struck with an incurable wanderlust. They also disrespect their parents and other authority figures. Searching for a place in society, they are (in their opinion only) wise beyond their years. Yes, some teenagers are like that—and some teenage bears, too.

Take the Ninemile Grizzly, for example. Several years ago, this young punk of a bear got himself into trouble not too far north of Missoula. He stole. He destroyed. He scared the daylights out of people. Finally, he was “removed from the bear population,” as wildlife managers call it. But he wasn’t entirely to blame. The Ninemile Grizzly had human accomplices who lured him to his doom. And until these people change their ways, more and more grizzlies

are likely to meet a similar fate.

The saga of the Ninemile Grizzly began in May 2001, when a bear came down from the mountains on the south border of the Flathead Indian Reservation, about 35 miles northwest of Missoula, and found garbage around homes on Upper Ninemile Creek, a scenic valley about halfway between I-90 and the Flathead River. Until then, this three-year-old bear probably had been hanging out with his mother, eating natural foods and being a good boy. But Mom likely chased away her nearly grown son so she could start a new family, and the boy bear struck out on his own.

Like some teenagers—human and bear alike—he immediately ran into trouble. He got hooked on bear drugs, an uncontrolled substance otherwise known as garbage. Once addicted to garbage, it seems, bears can’t shake the habit, which eventually leads

to their death—by wildlife authorities, vehicle collisions, or people defending their lives or property. Hence the oft-used adage, “A fed bear is a dead bear.”

When that teenage grizzly first came off the Reservation “Divide” (a mountainous high point between two drainages), it stumbled into the mushroom camps. In 2000, a forest fire had scorched the slopes of Sleeping Woman Mountain, launching a bumper crop of much-prized morel mushrooms the following spring. Roughly 200 mushroom pickers had flocked to the burn area, setting up makeshift camps where they lived in vans and tents with no toilets or garbage disposal facilities. It didn’t take long for bears to catch a whiff. Not only black bears, but also a 375-pound, subadult grizzly soon to become locally infamous.

The U.S. Forest Service manages most of that burned forestland. According to Stacie

DeWolf, who issued mushroom-picking permits, rangers from the Ninemile Ranger Station had known that some pickers would be coming, but the morel crop turned out to be better than expected, and they miscalculated the size and effect of the camps.

Ken Britton, a Ninemile ranger at the time, says that after a week or so, he and other USFS employees put a toilet in at each camp and started picking up trash daily. They also convinced the pickers to store food in their cars at night.

“After that,” Britton says, “it wasn’t a problem.”

But it was too late for what now became known as the Ninemile Grizzly. The teenage bear, which had been foraging on camp garbage for days, was already “habituated to human food rewards,” as biologists put it. Now, unlike a wild grizzly that ordinarily would avoid people and development, this one had begun to equate humans and their dwellings with food.

MORE THAN A NUISANCE

On June 1, 2001, Jamie Jonkel got the call he hates to receive. It was from Dave Murray, who two days earlier had been alarmed when a grizzly had tripped the motion detector light at his home near the confluence of Ninemile, McCormick, and Fire creeks.

“We see [black] bears all the time, but this one was a grizzly,” Murray had told the *Missoulian* at the time. “It was looking in our son’s window.” Murray yelled at the bear, and it took off.

But the animal came back the next morning while Murray was loading garbage into the back of his pickup truck. The grizzly jumped right into the truck bed, grabbed a pork chop bone, and ran off.

That’s when Murray called Jonkel, a bear management specialist for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, who immediately asked state game wardens to set a culvert trap. Over the next few days, the grizzly visited several of Murray’s neighbors, finding food and garbage at most sites. Five days later, the bear returned to the Murrays’ place, located

the baited culvert, and trapped himself.

Because the species is officially listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is ultimately in charge of grizzly bear management. The USFWS created the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee, a collection of state and federal wildlife management agency representatives, to guide

grizzly recovery efforts—

which

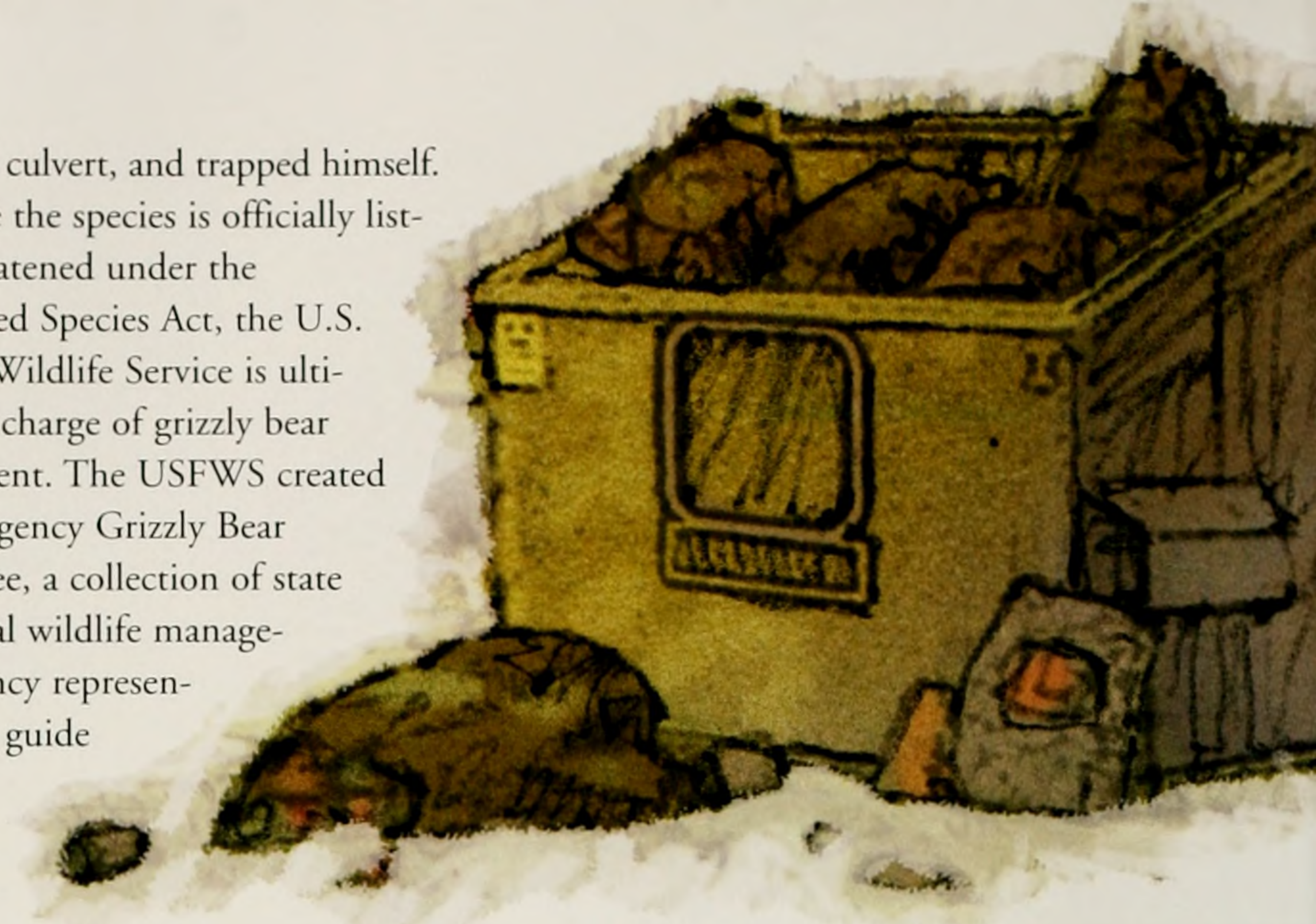
includes dealing with troublesome grizzlies.

Now that he had the Ninemile Grizzly trapped, Jonkel knew it was time to call in the IGBC. FWP wardens, working with IGBC coordinator Chris Servheen, fitted the bear with a radio collar and released him in the headwaters of Ninemile Creek, about 20 miles away. Bears don’t like to be trapped and transplanted, so the negative reinforcement often keeps them from returning. To drive home the message of “stay wild or die,” the wardens fired noisemaker shells when they released the bear. The scare tactics seemed to work. A few days later, an IGBC pilot recorded the grizzly’s signal along the Reservation Divide, indicating that the bear may have “reformed” and returned to eating natural foods.

The reform was short lived. On June 10, the grizzly traveled east over the Reservation Divide to near the little town of Ravalli on U.S. Highway 93. There, the bear ran amuck, killing 30 chickens, 3 ducks, a goose, and a peacock at the home of Shawn Andros.

When Andros came home that night, he saw the chicken coop door ajar. Several chickens lay dead on the ground. At first he thought his kids must have forgotten to close the door and that his dog had killed the fowl. But he quickly thought otherwise when a bear stood up in the brush behind the coop. Andros yelled at the bear. It wouldn’t leave at first, but then, after more yelling, it walked off.

Andros reported the incident to wardens with the Flathead Indian Reservation, but they figured it was a black bear because he told them he had never seen a grizzly in the



area. No one made the connection with the Murray incident of a few days earlier. Tribal wardens gave Andros rubber bullets and told him to fire them at the bear if it returned.

It did, the next evening. Andros shot at the bear several times and took a video, which Servheen and Jonkel used to identify it as their collared subadult from the previous week. Now they knew for certain they had a problem bear on their hands.

ON A RAMPAGE

This is when life got exciting for the residents of the Ninemile Valley, which once held just a few sprawling ranches but is now crowded with doublewide trailers, cabins, and retirement homes. This remote, scenic valley, with its sparkling mountain stream and horizon serrated by mountain peaks, has become part of what natural resource managers call the “urban interface,” where new rural residences pile up against public land near larger cities. And it’s where, increasingly, people are coming face to face with bears in their backyard.

On June 17, the Ninemile Grizzly moved west away from Ravalli, over the Reservation Divide and back into the Ninemile Valley. Here he went on another rampage—raiding bird feeders, foraging in open garbage dumps, stealing dog food off porches, killing chickens, feeding on abandoned cattle carcasses, and digging up compost piles.

So often during the next two weeks did FWP wardens, biologists, and volunteers receive calls about the Ninemile Grizzly that it seemed they practically “lived with the bear,” as one put it. This was no small

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task, as the bear kept moving erratically, almost like he was frantically searching for new food sources. The wardens tried to trap him again, but by the time they moved a culvert trap into place, the bear would be gone. A few times they spotted the grizzly and fired cracker shells, but this “aversive conditioning” didn’t work.

As the biologists and wardens chased the bear from one home site to another, it became obvious why the grizzly was hanging around and refusing to leave.

“We found some horrendous examples of human-related food rewards,” says Bill Thomas, an FWP information officer at Missoula. “There were truckloads of kitchen garbage at [some] residences.”

Sensing an impending disaster, FWP held two community meetings to convince residents to remove all food attractants. Thomas and other department employees even went door-to-door to talk to valley residents.

“We’d wake up folks in the middle of the night and ask if we could move their garbage inside,” he says.

Many people understood the problem and immediately removed garbage and other bear-enticing foods. But others wouldn’t change until the bear was already feeding on their land. By then, says Thomas, the grizzly had received yet another food reward near human habitation, reinforcing a downward spiral that was about to come to a dead stop.

On June 30, the Ninemile Grizzly lumbered into an enclosed porch looking for pet food, which it had done before. This time, however, the porch was occupied by a

woman watching TV. Even though the bear didn’t act aggressively, members of the IGBC decided it had grown too bold, too dangerous, and that they could not allow the rebellious teenager to become an adult.

By now, however, the Ninemile Grizzly had become so savvy that killing it would not be easy. The bear had learned to avoid traps and gun-wielding officials. But he couldn’t escape, not with the radio collar sending out his exact location to wardens. They tracked the bear twice down to I-90 before it went back north into the Ninemile Valley. Then, on July 1, the Ninemile Grizzly did two things no grizzly had ever been documented doing. It swam across the Lower Clark Fork River, and then it crossed the interstate.

To those who want to repopulate the Bitterroot Mountains with grizzly bears, this was a dream come true, because a viable grizzly population in the Bitterroot Ecosystem would be a giant stride toward complete recovery of the species. The Bitterroot Ecosystem encompasses 15 million acres of unoccupied grizzly habitat, which would allow the population to expand to a point where the species likely could be removed from protection of the Endangered Species Act.

However, the wayward subadult did not continue south into the Bitterroots to help form the foundation of a new grizzly population. Instead, he headed to the nearest chicken coop and killed more fowl before traveling back north across the freeway and river. But this time, instead of returning to the Ninemile Valley, he went northwest toward Superior, about halfway between Missoula and the Idaho border. There, wardens finally caught up with him, and several rifle shots later the Ninemile Grizzly’s saga had ended.

MORE DEAD GRIZZLIES?

Get ready for more Ninemile grizzlies throughout western Montana. Bear biologists believe grizzly populations in the Greater Yellowstone and Northern Continental Divide ecosystems are expanding. The bears are now showing up where they haven’t been seen for 50 years or more.

Many of these places were once isolated outposts that have since become rural communities. The people who have built there

didn’t think they were moving into grizzly country. Now they must learn to live with the big bear. If they don’t, each grizzly that comes down off the local divide and gets hooked on garbage will eventually be killed, and the species may never recover.

“Every year, I have a bear like the Ninemile Grizzly,” says Kevin Frey, Jonkel’s counterpart in Bozeman. For example, in 2002 Frey tried to manage a similar grizzly that he trapped and released. But it kept getting into trouble, and the trap-wise bear was involved in 55 “incidents” (anything resulting in a call to the department) before Frey finally caught it again—and had to destroy it.

What’s the solution to depredation problems caused by the expanding grizzly population? Jonkel has an idea that just might work. He’s working with Ninemile Valley residents to form a Neighborhood Watch-type program where landowners learn bear awareness and how to live with wildlife. They apply peer pressure to their noncompliant neighbors to convince them to clean up garbage and other bear attractants before government officials show up.

Jonkel gives out reams of brochures and other information on removing attractants as well as on using cracker shells and rubber bullets so landowners can aversively condition bears. And he frequently (and gingerly) points out that there’s a state law prohibiting people from leaving out anything that might attract bears.

The strategy seems to be working, though slowly, in the Ninemile Valley. Encouraged by these results, Jonkel and FWP’s three other bear management specialists are now trying it in other rural grizzly trouble spots. Volunteer landowner groups, the biologists say, can do much more than state or federal officials ever could. Peer pressure can be a powerful incentive, as everyone who has neglected to shovel their sidewalk, spray their weeds, or mow their lawn can attest.

Maybe someday soon people who leave out garbage, dog food, and other bear attractants will feel that same sense of community-induced shame. And then maybe the Ninemile grizzlies of the future will be able to reach the Bitterroot Mountains and begin helping their species expand farther west and step back from the edge of extinction. 🐻