



In-Between

Communities and FWP adapt as grizzlies spread from their two primary recovery zones into historic habitats. By Tom Dickson

Bears

Reports of grizzlies raiding beehives, startling hikers, or nosing around cabins near Whitefish, Gardiner, and other communities next to Glacier or Yellowstone National Parks are no longer surprising.

But similar reports near the Big Hole Valley, Helena, Butte, Stanford, and Dillon—all 100 miles or more from the national parks and surrounding grizzly recovery zones?

That's news.

"We've long known that grizzlies do very well in large, remote landscapes like the Bob Marshall or Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness Areas. Now they're showing us they can live in many other places, too," says Cecily Costello, bear research biologist for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks in Kalispell.

For example:

▶ In 2016, for the first time since the early 1900s, a grizzly was spotted in the upper Big Hole Valley.

▶ Since 2016 there have been regular reports of grizzlies in the Elkhorn Mountains south of Helena.

▶ For the past three years, hunters and hikers have found grizzly tracks in the Elk Park-Bernice area north of Butte.

▶ In 2017, FWP euthanized a pair of male grizzlies near Stanford, halfway between Great Falls and Lewistown, after they killed

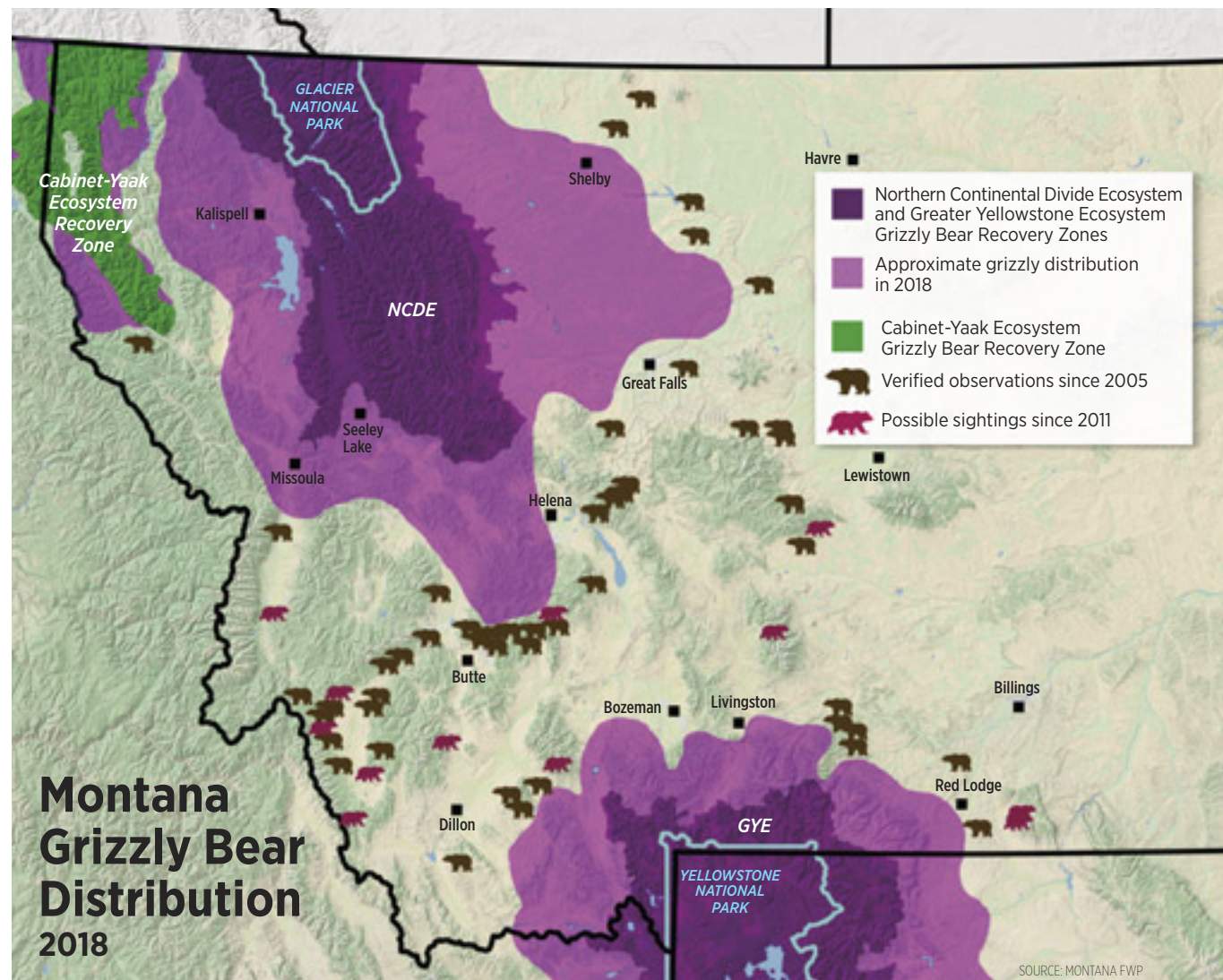
several calves. It was the farthest east of the Rocky Mountain Front that grizzly bears have been recorded in more than a century.

▶ In 2019, a grizzly charged two hunters in the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest near Dillon.

According to Mark Haroldson, a U.S. Geological Survey wildlife biologist, grizzly bear populations have filled the original recovery areas in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE) around Glacier National Park and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) around Yellowstone National Park. When grizzlies were listed as a federally protected species in 1975, the NCDE and GYE had an estimated 700 grizzlies combined. Today the estimate is 1,000 to 1,200 and 750 to 1,000, respectively—at least triple the 1975 populations. "These two recovery areas have reached their carrying capacity for grizzlies," says Haroldson, a member of the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team. "Now new generations of bears are spreading out into habitat that seems to suit them."

Costello notes that while grizzlies can be inconvenient for people living, working, and recreating in these areas, the population expansion is a conservation success story. "Grizzlies are doing very well in Montana," she says. "In large part, that's because most Montanans

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support grizzly conservation and have learned to coexist with bears.” By expanding between the NCDE and GYE, bears in the two populations might eventually begin breeding. Otherwise the two “island” populations will eventually lose genetic diversity necessary for long-term survival. “That connectivity would be very important in sustaining the future health of both populations,” Costello says.

The original recovery zones were established around Glacier and Yellowstone because they contained large blocks of public land and few private livestock operations, Haroldson says. “For decades, we’ve thought of grizzlies in remote landscapes far from cattle and communities,” he says. But as grizzlies have saturated the two recovery zones, they increasingly spread into areas where they lived before European settlement. “They’re showing us that private land is also part of the habitats they can use.”

Even a few grizzlies from the smaller

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Cabinet-Yaak Recovery Zone have wandered around western Montana.

The growing number of “in-between” bears has required adjustments by FWP, says Ken McDonald, head of the department’s Wildlife Division. “Our challenge is to try to get ahead of the bears and work with landowners and local communities to reduce attractants before conflicts happen,” McDonald says. “We’ve learned that if we can prepare people to start practicing smart food storage and livestock protections ahead of time, we can reduce conflicts with grizzlies if they come near a cabin or a ranch.”

Grizzlies aren’t the only concern. As more people build and recreate in mountain forests and foothills, conflicts with black bears have increased, too.

With strong support from the Montana Legislature, FWP has increased its number of bear management specialists. Recent positions have been added in Valier, Red Lodge, and Anaconda, in addition to specialists in Libby, Kalispell, Missoula, Bozeman, and

Choteau. “The key to grizzly conservation is to build local tolerance,” McDonald says. “The specialists do that by educating the public on conflict prevention. If a bear does start causing problems, they move in quickly and try to resolve the issue before it reaches a point where it has to be killed.”

The spread of bears has required other adjustments as well, says McDonald. “For more and more ranchers, it means having to modify operations to reduce possible conflicts, like using electric fence around calving corrals and sheep pens.”

According to Costello, the growing number of new sightings shows that private lands provide essential connectivity habitat as the bears move among public lands and mountain ranges. “Ranchers, especially, are being asked to tolerate more and more inconvenience and even economic loss because of bears,” she says. “Their tolerance, along with the connectivity habitat on their land, is becoming a major contribution to grizzly conservation in Montana.” 🐻