



BURSTING

Whether or not the ever-expanding Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem grizzly population is delisted, FWP will continue to resolve problems between bears and people. BY TOM DICKSON

AT THE SEAMS

TURF CLUB Two grizzlies graze in a western Montana hay field. Because bears eat just about anything—from grass to garbage, “food security is the main cause of conflict between grizzlies and humans,” says one FWP biologist. PHOTO BY DUANE HUIE

If ever a place was ripe for grizzly problems, it's Two Creek Monture Ranch. Surrounding the 21,000-acre cattle operation, about 50 miles east of Missoula, are the storied Blackfoot River and state and federal wildlife lands, forests, and wilderness. Deer, elk, and 900 cattle graze the ranch's rolling pasture amid stands of 100-foot-tall ponderosa pines. In summer the ranch is also home to 15 to 20 grizzlies. The bears are part of a 1,000-strong

population living in the 96,000-square-mile Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE), a rugged, mostly mountainous region that extends north from the Blackfoot Valley into Alberta and British Columbia.

So it's no surprise that Two Creek Monture has lost cattle to bears: The large carnivores killed four calves in 1998 when grizzlies first showed up on the ranch. "That

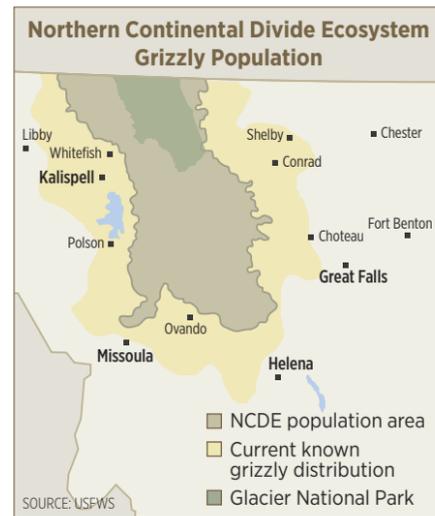
first year it was very spooky, going out to the calving lot and shining a light in the face of a bear," says Wayne Slaght, ranch manager. "We were scared. And we were mad that we now had to deal with bears." Since then, grizzly numbers have more than tripled in the Blackfoot Valley.

Yet Two Creek Monture Ranch has not lost a single cow to grizzlies for 20 years.



“ You can fight it or you can deal with it. And fighting just isn't going to work.”

RESOURCEFUL RANCHER Working with FWP bear specialists and federal biologists, Wayne Slaght, manager of the Two Creek Monture Ranch near Ovando, has eliminated cattle depredation despite having 15 to 20 grizzlies on the property. The ranch uses a combination of electric fences, rapid cattle carcass removal, and tight grain storage to keep bears from getting into trouble.



The reason? Three miles of electric fence, tight grain storage, and prompt livestock carcass removal. "I know that ranchers in other parts of the state are having a hard time with bears," says Slaght, a board member of the Montana Stockgrowers Association. "But you can fight it or you can deal with it. And fighting just isn't going to work."

Across western and parts of central Montana, increasing numbers of people are learning how to live with grizzlies. Over the past decade, the federally protected NCDE population has grown by 38 percent and expanded its range by 60 percent. "It's one of Montana's great wildlife conservation achievements," says Ken McDonald, head of the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Wildlife Division. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) is now considering a proposal for removing the population from the federal list of threatened species, a decision known as delisting.

Whether or not the NCDE population is delisted, FWP officials say the department will continue to manage grizzlies. That includes helping people learn how to prevent bear conflicts and rapidly resolving problems when they do occur. "That's the only way to build the local tolerance necessary for NCDE population expansion and connectivity with other federal grizzly recovery areas," McDonald says. "When there's a conflict, our bear specialists move in quickly and resolve the issue before it reaches a point where the bear has to be killed."



“ This is how it starts.”

BAD BEGINNING Tim Manley, FWP bear management specialist in Kalispell, points to grizzly tracks near a trash bin in Whitefish. Garbage security is key to reducing bear problems, he says.

FED BEAR EQUALS DEAD BEAR

Tim Manley is telling me about garbage. Manley is one of five FWP bear management specialists who, along with tribal and federal counterparts, work with communities and landowners in and around the NCDE. Their primary task is to reduce problems, or "conflicts," between bears and people.

Early one morning as we drive through Whitefish, a ski resort town of about 7,500 people just west of Glacier National Park, Manley tells me the primary reason grizzly bears get into trouble is food. "One of the hardest things to get people to understand is that grizzlies are omnivores that eat just about anything," he says.

Bears gobble up garbage, animal carcasses, beehives, row crops (including lentils, alfalfa, oats, wheat, and corn), tree fruit, bird seed in feeders, and dog food left on back porches. A colleague of Manley's calls the region's growing number of backyard chickens "grizzly bear gateway drugs."

Bears addicted to poultry, trash, or other human-produced foods must be trapped and sometimes euthanized to safeguard

public safety. Lured to neighborhoods by garbage, the large carnivores can end up on a house deck, pawing at the door. "People don't think they are feeding bears, but by not securing garbage and other foods, they actually are—and writing the bear's death sentence," says Manley.

A few minutes later, we round a corner in a quiet Whitefish neighborhood that abuts the Flathead National Forest and see a toppled trash bin, pizza crusts and eggshells strewn about. Manley inspects the mess and points to a muddy grizzly paw print near the lid. "This is how it starts," he says.

For thousands of years, Native Americans revered and coexisted with grizzlies. New arrivals to the American frontier were far less accommodating. Scientists estimate that 50,000 to 100,000 grizzlies lived in today's lower 48 states before European settlement, ranging from the Mississippi River west to the Pacific Ocean. Within a century, fewer than 1,000 bears remained.

The large carnivores were seen as threats to roads, railroads, mines, farms, towns, and ranches. The Great Plains, where in the early 19th century Lewis and Clark regularly

encountered grizzlies, became home to combines, cattle, and communities. Wherever people went, they killed bears to protect themselves, livestock, crops, and other property. Grizzlies were eliminated everywhere except in and around Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks and remote forests in the Rocky Mountains.

In 1975, the federal government listed the grizzly as threatened under the two-year-old Endangered Species Act.

In its 1993 grizzly recovery plan, the USFWS identified several recovery areas in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, and Washington where grizzlies still roamed or that contained critical bear habitat. The NCDE and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) are the largest and contain the most grizzlies.

Under federal protection, grizzly numbers grew steadily in much of the species' range. By 2015 the population in the GYE had topped 700, above the federal recovery goal of 500. The USFWS delisted the recovered population two years later. The agency has said it intends to issue, by September 2018, an initial proposal to delist the NCDE population.



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LEFT TO RIGHT: LAURA NELSON; TOM DICKSON/MONTANA OUTDOORS; DONALD M. JONES



“If the birth rate is higher than the mortality rate, the population is growing.”

DOCUMENTING GROWTH Cecily Costello, FWP bear research biologist, takes a tranquilized grizzly's vitals signs as part of a 10-year NCDE population trend study that showed a 2.3 percent annual increase.

THREE CONDITIONS

The decision to hand NCDE population management authority back to Montana—as well as to Glacier National Park, the Blackfoot Nation, and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes—would be largely based on three conditions: The habitat must be healthy and abundant; the population must be kept at or above a viable size and well distributed within the ecosystem; and FWP and tribal bear specialists must continue to reduce conflicts to help keep humans safe and reduce unnecessary bear mortality.

The NCDE contains the most intact grizzly bear habitat in the Lower 48. The ecosystem includes Glacier National Park, parts of two Indian reservations and five national forests (containing four wilderness areas), and other state and federal lands. Grizzlies also roam nearby private lands.

The population too is healthy and robust. Scientists determined that by first figuring how many bears lived in the NCDE. In the mid-2000s, the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) undertook an unprecedented count-

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.

ing project that gathered and analyzed bear hair DNA. The agency calculated an estimated population of 765 grizzlies, a healthy 62 percent of them females.

The next step was determining whether the population was increasing or decreasing. Each year from 2004 to 2014, crews from an interagency team of state, federal, and tribal members captured and tranquilized 25 female grizzlies and fitted them with radio collars. They monitored the bears from airplanes and helicopters to learn how many cubs were born and, if any grizzlies died, the cause of death. “If the birth rate is higher than the mortality rate, the population is growing,” says Cecily Costello, FWP grizzly bear research biologist.

Over the 10-year study period, bear researchers found, the population grew an average of 2.3 percent per year—which equates to roughly 1,000 bears today. Researchers also learned that grizzly range is expanding into areas not occupied by bears for decades. State, federal, and tribal agencies continue to monitor the NCDE grizzly population trend and bear mortality.

“The NCDE population is fully recovered

and expanding,” says McDonald. “And because it’s connected to Canadian populations, it’s more genetically diverse than the Yellowstone population.”

Grizzly recovery is due partly to the Endangered Species Act and other federal laws and actions that protect the bears and their habitat. For instance, by closing old logging roads, the U.S. Forest Service reduces poaching, vehicle collisions, and other human-caused bear mortality.

Credit also goes to Montanans’ stubborn insistence on keeping the state from growing too tame. “True, civilization has come to Montana, but it hasn’t gone mad—not yet anyway.... This is why Montana has grizzly bears. And this is why we like to live here,” editor Bill Schneider wrote in a 1975 issue of *Montana Outdoors*.

Montana values the grizzly (check out

the patch on FWP uniforms) and takes steps to ensure its survival. State biologists work with landowners, conservation groups, and other agencies to acquire critical grizzly habitat, conduct research, and spread bear-awareness messages to communities, schools, ranchers, campers, and hunters to prevent unnecessary grizzly deaths and protect people and livestock.

CREATING ACCEPTANCE

Creative trouble-shooting also helps. “If we weren’t out resolving conflicts, some people would have taken matters into their own hands and we’d have a lot more dead grizzlies,” says McDonald. The growth of the NCDE population isn’t happening only within wilderness areas and Glacier National Park. It’s also occurring on the fringes. Each year more and more grizzlies

move from the mountains into areas where people live and work. Speedy, effective response by FWP bear specialists, wildlife biologists, and game wardens to grizzly problems helps build local tolerance. “The greater the tolerance, the fewer the calls for bears to be taken out,” says Manley, the Kalispell-area bear management specialist. Ranchers, homeowners, and school administrators who encounter a grizzly for the first time often insist that wildlife agencies kill the bear. “But as people learn that bears don’t necessarily pose a threat to their safety or livelihood, and to begin to trust FWP bear management, they are far less likely to demand lethal removal,” Manley says.

Over the past two decades, Jamie Jonkel, FWP bear management specialist in Ovando, has helped Blackfoot Valley landowners install miles of electric grizzly-

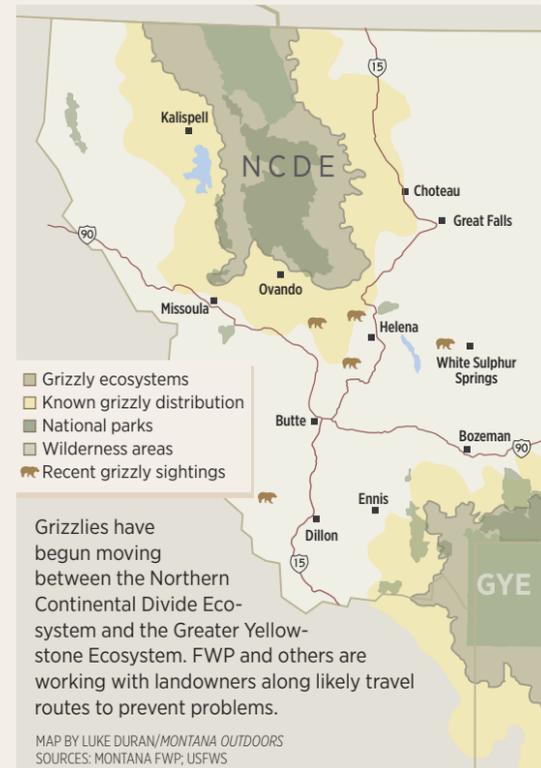
Bridging the genetics gap

The Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE) grizzly population is genetically connected to bears in Canada, ensuring a steady influx of new genes. But the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) population is currently isolated. Scientists say the GYE population will remain genetically diverse for the next century, but eventually it will become less so and thus less resilient to disease, environmental changes, and other threats.

Male grizzlies could be trapped from the NCDE and transferred to the GYE to augment the gene pool. But a more ecologically sustainable way to link the two populations is natural movement. It looks like that’s already underway.

In recent years, grizzlies have been spotted in the Big Belt and Elkhorn Mountains, the upper Big Hole Valley, and the Little Blackfoot Valley. “The potential for gene flow between the two populations is likely greater now than it’s been for decades,” says Frank van Manen, a U.S. Geological Survey senior research biologist who leads the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team.

To safely cross the 70 miles between the currently occupied range of the two populations, a bear needs to stay out of trouble. A recent study led by van Manen and FWP bear research biologist Cecily Costello mapped out the most likely routes male grizzlies would take to travel from the NCDE to the GYE. That information will help land managers and conservation groups work with landowners to set up conservation easements and other habitat protection measures that allow for grizzly bear movement. “The study also helps us build bear tolerance and acceptance among landowners,” says Ken McDonald, head of the FWP Wildlife Division. “Instead of chasing bear problems, we want to figure out where bears will be in a few years and start working with landowners and communities to prevent problems before they occur.”



LEFT TO RIGHT: MONTANA FWP; AARON TEASDALE

“By not securing garbage and other bear foods, you’re writing their death sentence.”

PROBLEM SOLVER Tim Manley looks at images from a remote camera of a grizzly family near a garage north of Polebridge.



“We established trust by listening to local concerns and not coming in and acting like we had all the answers.”

resistant fencing, mostly around calving lots, and remove bear attractants. Instead of dumping dead calves or cows into nearby ravines, once a common practice, Blackfoot Valley ranchers now move carcasses to fenced composting sites. “We established trust by listening to local concerns and not coming in and acting like we had all the answers,” Jonkel says.

Cooperative solutions work. Grizzly bear conflicts in the valley dropped by 74 percent from 2003 to 2013, even as resident bear numbers grew. “Since 2013, we’ve continued to see even fewer grizzly conflicts and very few bear mortalities,” Jonkel says.

While conflicts have declined where grizzlies are well established, problems have grown as bears repopulate areas where they haven’t been seen in decades. In far northwestern Montana, that includes places like Eureka and Libby. On the other side of the Continental Divide, bears have recently ventured more than 100 miles east of the Front to Fort Benton, Chester, Shelby, Dutton, and Stanford.

For decades, grizzlies rarely wandered east of U.S. Highway 89. But as the NCDE population expands, bears follow brushy creek and river bottoms from mountain foothills into open plains, where they were common before white settlement. McDonald says communities and landowners encountering grizzlies for the first time are understandably scared and concerned. “We take those fears seriously and do all we can to protect the safety of people and livestock,” he says.

RAPID RESPONDERS

In some places, that means building barriers around things bears like to eat. Electric fence now surrounds human-created food sources throughout grizzly country, from chicken coops, calving areas, and sheep pastures to vineyards, beehives, and corn fields. To thwart grizzly scrounging, Lincoln and Flathead Counties have fenced waste disposal sites. Whitefish restricts residential garbage bin placement, and other towns require bear-proof trash containers. Bear specialists urge homeowners to keep dog food indoors and remove bird feeders (bears love seed and suet). Each fall, Jonkel hires University of Montana students to pick bear-attracting



GRAIN-FED GRIZZLIES Above: bear tracks in a neighborhood garden in Valier. Right: Bear specialist Mike Madel tests an electric bear-proof fence installed around grain bins near Choteau, east of the Rocky Mountain Front.



“Electric fence can be a great way to keep bears out of trouble.”



A BETTER PLACE TO LIVE Above: A grizzly is released after it was captured in a culvert trap and moved to a national forest far from towns, dumps, and other areas containing human food, crop, or garbage temptations. Top: Jamie Jonkel, FWP bear management specialist in Ovando, says a speedy response to problems builds tolerance among landowners in bear country.

apples, plums, and other fruit for homeowners who can’t do it themselves. The town of Dupuyer even installed electric fence around its school playground.

Mike Madel, FWP bear specialist in Choteau, says that as bears move east of the Front into agricultural areas, they are attracted to spilled barley and other grain around storage bins. “Electric fence can be a great way to keep bears out of trouble,” he says. FWP hopes to find funding to buy a portable 50-gallon industrial vacuum to suck up spilled grain near storage bins, often located within small towns.

Public education is essential and constant. At community “bear fairs,” in school auditoriums, and over coffee in kitchens, bear specialists explain where people are most likely to encounter grizzlies and when and how to use bear pepper spray. Wesley Sarmento, a new FWP bear management specialist in Conrad who started in early

2017, says he’s already given 50 public talks and set up a website showing grizzly locations. “People want to know when a bear is in the area,” he says. “They want to know about the bear management we’re doing.”

While most bears never get into trouble, some do. Grizzlies that occasionally wander through a yard after sunset or tip a trash bin are usually left alone. But a repeat offender is captured with a snare or culvert trap, then relocated or killed, depending on the threat to human safety and livestock.

Grizzlies do maim and kill people, though rarely, and usually only in a surprise encounter. Fewer than one person per decade dies of a bear attack in the NCDE, including Glacier National Park, which attracts up to three million visitors each year. The most recent was in 2015 when a mountain biker on a trail in the Flathead National Forest rounded a corner and collided with a bear that then attacked and killed him.

PROTECTING PEOPLE AND BEARS

Grizzlies would remain in good hands if delisted, according to Montana officials. “Both we and the federal government remain committed to maintaining the conservation measures that led to the population recovery in the first place,” says Martha Williams, FWP director. Removing grizzlies from federal oversight wouldn’t remove protections, she says. “They would still be protected from illegal or indiscriminate killing.”

Williams points to Montana’s healthy wolf, mountain lion, and black bear populations. “There’s no reason to think grizzlies won’t be just as well conserved,” she says.

A major condition of delisting would be federal confidence in Montana’s NCDE grizzly “conservation strategy.” Now being finalized, the strategy aims to reassure the USFWS—and federal judges who would adjudicate possible lawsuits—that the state, federal agencies, Indian tribes, and others

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: LAURA NELSON; AARON TEASDALE; AARON TEASDALE; AARON TEASDALE



“People want to know when bears are in the area and what management we’re doing.”

would continue reducing bear conflicts and monitoring grizzly birth and mortality rates, food supplies, and habitat threats.

“Montana is firmly committed to conserving the grizzly population for the long term,” Williams says. “At the same time, we’re equally committed to meeting the needs of communities and landowners having very real problems with grizzlies.”

As for hunting, state management could allow for a tightly restricted season that would not endanger the population. “Even so, we recognize that grizzly hunting is a highly charged issue and have no plans to



SHOW AND TELL Above: Wesley Sarmiento, FWP bear management specialist in Conrad, teaches bear biology to students at the New Rockport Hutterite Colony near Choteau, where grizzlies have begun showing up in recent years. Left: Using practice canisters, Sarmiento shows children at the Birch Creek Colony near Valier how to use bear spray.

consider it at this point,” Williams says.

Montana will continue managing grizzlies as it has in recent years no matter what the federal government decides about delisting. “Either way, we’ll still focus on teaching people how to secure food and garbage, showing them how to protect themselves and livestock, and resolving conflicts, just as we are now,” Williams says.

Grizzlies have shown they can thrive in

a wide range of environments, from wilderness areas to wheat fields. What restricts their range is not habitat security but public tolerance. FWP specialists and others are helping build that. But even in a state where the grizzly has been designated the official state animal, there are limits to what some people can tolerate. “Grizzlies add diversity to the landscape and are part of this ecosystem,” says Randy Mannix, who raises cattle in the Blackfoot Valley with his two brothers. “I like seeing them. But we need to protect ourselves and our property, and we can’t have bears everywhere. It’s just not fair to the people who live here.” 🐻

PHOTOS: MONTANA FWP