Vital News

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Cover photo by Robert Scriba

The Vital Ground Foundation is the premier private-sector organization ensuring the recovery and long-term survival of grizzly bears through the protection and restoration of natural areas and corridors where grizzly bears and other wildlife can move freely and safely. We also help reduce conflicts between bears and humans by supporting "bear aware" communities.

WHERE THE GRIZZLY CAN WALK, THE EARTH IS HEALTHY AND WHOLE.

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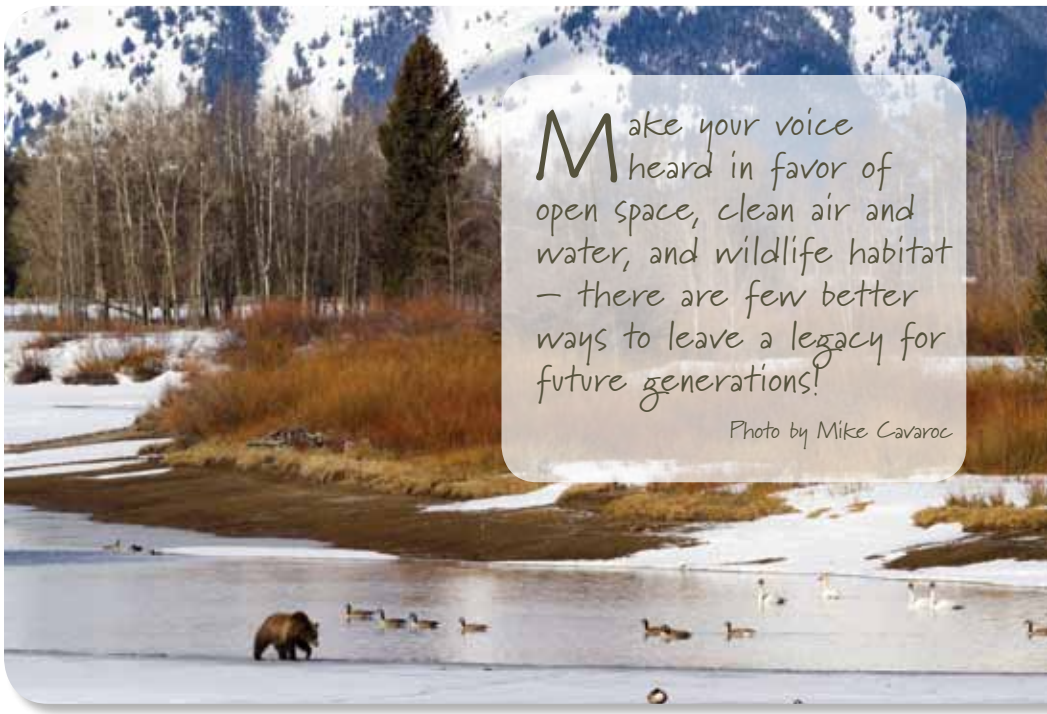
Executive Director's Corner

Land Trusts are a Durable Investment in the Future

At a time when the political landscape mirrors the fragmentation and uncertainty that grizzlies face on the physical landscape, I find comfort in the fact that Vital Ground's work is by design, enduring. The reason for this is that conservation is nonpartisan. Rational people might disagree on how to best accomplish it, but no reasonable party or individual can argue against ensuring that open space, clean water, abundant wildlife resources and working agricultural lands remain available for future generations of Americans.

Those core values are embedded in our culture and our laws. As a result, land trusts traditionally enjoy solid, bipartisan and nationwide support. The Land Trust Alliance currently services more than 1,000 member trusts, cumulatively representing more than 5 million supporters nationwide. An illustration of the reach of that support can be found in the fact that in 2015 – when Congress and the administration could find nearly nothing else to agree on – they made permanent the enhanced federal tax incentives for conservation easement donations that were first penned in the Pension Protection Act of 2006. In doing so, a powerful tool for voluntary conservation was cemented through bipartisan cooperation.

In addition to strong public support and the weight of the federal tax code and pursuant regulations, land trusts benefit from a deeply layered legal framework underpinned by state open space and real property statutes, local



county planning authorities, and the private agreements negotiated and executed between the organization and its partnering landowners. It is a structure that is designed to guarantee that investments in qualified conservation projects continue to provide their intended public benefits over the long haul, regardless of political swings stemming from elections or an individual representative's personal agenda.

That is not to say that the path ahead is clear. While headlines are dominated by tweets of the day, challenges to the pace of conservation lurk in the background. Significant budget cuts loom for agencies administering the programs on which we rely, creating uncertainty for stalwart conservation mechanisms like the Forest Legacy, Community Forest and Open Spaces, and Agricultural Conservation Easement programs – all critical voluntary conservation tools that help close funding gaps when tax incentives alone aren't enough to get a project done.

Over both the short and long terms, land trusts, landowners and millions of individual supporters must double our efforts. We must speak up in upcoming discussions on the Farm Bill and the Land and Water Conservation Fund – conversations critical to the best interests of all conservationists, including ranchers, farmers, foresters and the public.

Land trust practitioners must also continue to systematically cultivate and apply sound science in our work. It is an anchor for both our projects and our outreach and communication efforts that will maintain our credibility while others are making a concerted effort to repeal and replace science and integrity with...something else.

Regardless of whether you're angered or inspired into action, focus on making a durable investment in the good of the environment, the climate, your children's future or your favorite wildlife species. Throw your time and energy behind a land trust. You'll be in good company in helping to build a lasting legacy!

Prairie Thunder Red Wine

by Ten Spoon Vineyard + Winery

In tribute to Montana's magnificent grizzly, we've crafted a rich, Syrah from organic grapes grown at Harold Pleasant's Vineyard in Prosser, Wash. Full-bodied with notes of chocolate, tobacco and spice, Prairie Thunder rolls across the palate to a deep, bear-satisfying finish. 2014 Silver Medal Winner at the New York Finger Lakes Competition.

Prairie Thunder is available in retail shops across Montana, and can be shipped to other states where allowed.

Vital Ground receives $1.00 for each bottle of Prairie Thunder purchased.

Order yours at www.tenspoon.com

GRIZZLY BLEND COFFEE

by Montana Coffee Traders

Grizzly Blend is a full-bodied, medium-roasted coffee. Vital Ground receives $1.00 for each pound of Grizzly Blend purchased.

Order yours at www.coffeetraders.com

A Bridge for Northwest Montana

Connectivity, corridors, linkages—as a supporter of Vital Ground's work, you hear the words a lot. But where's the walk behind the talk?

Photo by Kevin Rhoades

Photo by Mitch Doherty

In our latest project, we have the chance to build a wildlife corridor that is more concrete—and perhaps more critical—than any land we've acquired before.

Wild River Estates is no sprawling preserve. North of Troy, Montana, it comprises just 42.6 acres of private land along the Kootenai River. But this property is one of those right places for conservation, a small parcel that can make a big difference. With great potential to link struggling populations of grizzlies and other wildlife, and within an ecosystem of critical long-term importance to bear recovery, Wild River needs your help.

Grizzly bears in the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem are struggling. Tucked into the northwest corner of the state, the Cabinet-Yaak does not benefit from a national park or a large designated wilderness complex that stabilizes local conservation work. U.S. Highway 2 follows the Kootenai River Valley through the middle of the ecosystem, a geographic waistline that splits the area in two. Recent studies estimate just 25 bears on either side of the river, with little genetic exchange and the southern subpopulation at high risk for inbreeding.

With improved connectivity, new grizzlies could diversify the Cabinet-Yaak gene pool without traveling huge distances. To the north and northwest, Canadian bears roam in the Purcell and Selkirk Mountains, while a patchwork of public land reaches east to the Whitefish Range and the rest of the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem, home to roughly 1,000 resident grizzlies. As it stands, the Cabinet-Yaak is a shaky bridge between firmer ground for the Great Bear.

Before we strengthen its connections to other ecosystems, however, we must repair the middle of the bridge itself. That's where Wild River enters the picture.

The rectangular plot lies sandwiched between two mountain ranges, and, on a smaller scale, between a railroad, a river, and a highway. Highway 2 borders it to the east—and across it lies protected habitat, beginning with another Vital Ground property, Yaak Mountain, then reaching north into U.S. Forest Service lands above the Yaak Valley. Meanwhile, the Kootenai River lines the property to the west, with rail track on the far side and a thumb of Forest Service land reaching all the way down to the waterline. The corridor is there for the making: with both Yaak Mountain and Wild River protected, we will significantly widen a bottleneck, giving bears, Canada lynx, elk and moose a much better chance at successfully navigating between the Purcells and the Cabinets.

The alternative is a tighter choke and a minefield for conflict. The property under contract is platted into 12 subdivided parcels, originally planned as riverfront real estate. If home sites are completed, ranging wildlife will have to cross not just a highway and a river, but yards and gardens and driveways. The risk of a human-bear incident will skyrocket, and all wildlife's chances for safe travel will plummet.

We are not alone in pinpointing Wild River. Ten years ago, bear biologists identified this specific area as the best site north of Troy for protecting a corridor. Thanks to the Yaak and Kootenai rivers' nearby confluence, the land around Wild River offers gentler travel than the jagged slopes that line much of the Kootenai Valley. High levels of wildlife have long been documented in the area, ranging from white-tailed deer and mountain lions to bats and wolverines. Our frequent partner, the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative, has earmarked the spot, too, and is now joining Vital Ground in a fundraising push to help ensure our completion of the Wild River project.

By joining the effort, it's not just bears and other mammals you'll be helping. Once protected, Wild River's quarter mile of shoreline will aid endangered white sturgeon, a fish that has historically migrated along the Kootenai. Heading upstream from Kootenay Lake in Canada, an adult female sturgeon recently swam through the area—the first documented ambassador of the species to enter Montana in many decades.

With your help, her passage will serve as a sign of things to come, as together we build a stable bridge in the heart of the Cabinet-Yaak.

—Matt Hart

YOUNG LIVING® FOUNDATION

The Young Living Foundation is honored to partner with The Vital Ground Foundation. Through this partnership, the Young Living Foundation donates a portion of all proceeds from Young Living's Animal Scents™ product line sales directly to The Vital Ground Foundation.

The Young Living Foundation is committed to empowering individuals to defy limitations by providing education, wellness, conservation and business opportunities.

Since the establishment of its first farm, Young Living is dedicated to protecting plants, wildlife, and natural habitats. Known for its unique Seed to Seal® process, Young Living Essential Oils ensures its seeds are planted in soil free from chemicals or harmful pesticides.

Prior to sale, Young Living's Animal Scents products have been through the 5-step Seed to Seal® process of purity testing.

The Animal Scents line includes: Animal Scents Ointment, Animal Scents Shampoo and essential oil blends: Infect Away™, Mendwell™, ParaGize™, Puriclean™, RepelAroma™ and T-Away™.

To purchase Animal Scents products and support The Vital Ground Foundation, visit Young Living's Animal Scents product page.

'All Wildlife Need Vital Ground'

A few days before Thanksgiving, Cameron Nace made his annual pilgrimage to the Vital Ground office after visiting the Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center in West Yellowstone, Mont. During the long car ride to Missoula, Cameron recited new statistics and facts about bears to his parents, Kelly and Michael Jindrich.

Cameron, who has autism, became passionate about bears when he was 10 years old. He saw the movie "The Bear" and wanted to learn more about its star, Bart the Bear. In 2002, Kelly and Michael found out about the opportunity to "Meet the Animals" and Doug and Lynne Seus, at a Vital Ground event held in Utah. By this time, Bart had died and the Seus family was raising Tank, Honeybump and Little Bart. Eight weeks after seeing the bears, Doug and Lynne sent Cameron a package with some of Bart's hair and a photograph of Doug and Bart. Cameron has hung the photograph in his bedroom and keeps the bear hair in a Native American medicine bag. "Doug and Cameron have a special bond," Kelly said, "They both love and have a special connection with bears."

"Not a day goes by without Cameron talking about bears. His connection to them is single-minded and profound. He states matter-of-factly, and with the deepest conviction, 'Grizzly bears need vital ground. Black bears need vital ground. All wildlife need vital ground.'"

Now 32 years old and a devotee of Bart's many movies, Cameron can recite life histories of the Seus' bears, their movie credits, and natural history facts about black, grizzly and polar bears. He postulates, "Is Tank the Bear a horrible, shaggy brown monster? I don't think so. He's a North American male grizzly bear movie star."

Since seeing the movie "The Bear" at age 10, Cameron Nace has been infatuated with Bart the Bear and wild bears ever since. Here's Cameron and Vital Ground co-founder Lynne Seus at a Vital Ground event.

His favorite film is probably "The Edge," which stars Bart, Anthony Hopkins and Alec Baldwin.

Cameron's bedroom is a veritable natural history museum, library and gift shop. He starts each day looking at wildlife books, making copies of pictures and listing facts on the backs. In his filing cabinet, he has more than 1,000 photographs with notes.

For 22 years, Cameron's parents have gone to great lengths to fuel his passion. Family vacations are to zoos, wildlife sanctuaries or Vital Ground events. Not a day goes by without Cameron talking about bears. His connection to them is single-minded and profound. He states matter-of-factly, and with the deepest conviction, "Grizzly bears need vital ground. Black bears need vital ground. All wildlife need vital ground."

—Kim Davitt

Share Your Conservation Legacy

Nearly a decade ago, Vital Ground launched the Silvertip Legacy Circle to recognize donors who make a lasting commitment to protect grizzly habitat by pledging support through wills, trusts, life insurance or other planned gifts. A planned gift can generate special tax and/or income benefits for the donor's lifetime; it also provides future benefits to a charitable organization like Vital Ground.

There are many ways to make a planned gift, including wills, living trusts, charitable gift annuities, charitable remainder trusts, charitable lead trusts, life estates and life insurance.

GIFTS THROUGH YOUR WILL

Making a gift in your will or "living trust" through an outright, residuary or contingent bequest could be the most realistic way to provide a substantial contribution to Vital Ground while obtaining major benefits for you and your estate. A gift through your estate may reduce or even eliminate federal estate taxes.

CHARITABLE GIFT ANNUITY

A charitable gift annuity can pay you an annual fixed income for life for up to two beneficiaries, age 65 and older. Vital Ground offers charitable gift annuities according to rates provided by the American Council on Gift Annuities.

CHARITABLE REMAINDER TRUST

A charitable remainder trust provides income for life or for a fixed number of years. You select the term and the payout rate. The lower the payout rate, the higher the charitable income tax deduction.

CHARITABLE LIFE ESTATE

A home, other kind of personal residence, perhaps a farm or a ranch, a parcel or a remote acreage can be gifted to Vital Ground with the donor receiving a life interest in the property. Outright gifts of property or undivided interests in a property prior to a sale can also be mutually beneficial.

GIFTS OF LIFE INSURANCE

A life insurance policy can also be a wonderful gift to leave to an organization, whose mission you support. You can name Vital Ground a primary, secondary, final or remainder beneficiary of your current policy or you can transfer ownership of a policy to a non-profit organization and receive an immediate income tax deduction.

Planned giving can be complicated and often requires professional input and guidance. The Vital Ground Foundation would be happy to work with you to help you realize your dreams, meet your needs, and help save a place for magnificent bears and wild critters. We are working to ensure a future for grizzly bears; your planned gifts can add to their and your shared conservation legacy. For more information, contact Kim Davitt at 406-549-8650 or online at kdavitt@vitalground.org.

Photo by Jamie Scarrow

At Vital Ground's fall board meeting, *your trustees approved three exciting new partner grants, to protect habitat and support the conservation and coexistence work of other groups and individuals. These additions brought our 2016 Conservation Partners Grant Program funding total to more than $60,000 given to seven important projects benefitting grizzlies, people and other wildlife. Thank you for continuing to support Vital Ground's long tradition of collaboration - we are stronger together!*

Filmmaker Chris Morgan

North Cascades Augmentation Video

Moving grizzly bears is no easy task—physically or politically. When biologists relocate an animal from a stable population to a struggling one, they call it augmentation. When it comes to grizzlies, the process has been used occasionally and successfully to genetically bolster the small Cabinet-Yaak bear population. Long outlawed in Washington state, augmentation is now under reconsideration as part of a proposal to return a resident grizzly population to the North Cascades Ecosystem. Ecologist, conservationist and film producer Chris Morgan tells the story of grizzly augmentation in northwest Montana as a primer for Washingtonians on the potential that this recovery method holds for the Evergreen State. His short, compelling film prioritizes the value of communities coming together to help an iconic native species. It's just the kind of informative storytelling we want—and with your help, supported! View it on line at: www.vitalground.org/timeforthegrizzly.

According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Washington's North Cascades are rugged and remote enough to support a self-sustaining population of grizzly bears. With your help, Vital Ground supported an educational video about reintroducing bears to this vast Northwest ecosystem.

Idaho Fish and Game

Bismark Meadows Area Security

The Bismark Meadows complex offers lush wetland habitat amid the remote Selkirk Mountains of north Idaho. It's an ecologically unique project for Vital Ground, and a key one in our work to extend connectivity between larger populations of Canadian bears and their struggling southern cousins. With state-owned land near our own property, we're grateful to support Idaho Fish and Game's efforts to improve law enforcement and conservation standards in the area. Grizzlies especially favor Bismark Meadows as spring habitat, so our partnership to ensure wildlife security there couldn't be timelier.

Photo by Linda Lantzy.

Reeder Creek flows through Vital Ground's Bismark Meadows' property in North Idaho. Inset photo: We lease out a log home to the Idaho Fish and Game for use as a biological station and patrol cabin. The lease agreement provides the agency with a base of operations on the northwest side of the Selkirk Mountains and relieves Vital Ground of many of the property maintenance costs.

Photo by Kevin Rhoades.

In this April 2016 photo, Vital Ground board members investigate mobile electric fencing that can be swiftly rolled out to safeguard both livestock and bears. The Blackfoot Challenge is a forum of private landowners, NGOs and agencies that coordinate conservation work in Montana's Blackfoot Valley, where the prevailing thinking is to live in harmony with a diversity of species, including bears and cattle.

Blackfoot Challenge

Range Rider and Outreach Programs

Few things sound more authentically western than the job title of Range Rider. The Blackfoot Challenge's program lives up to the name, providing essential on-the-ground services that ensure the coexistence of wildlife and ranching—two sides of the Blackfoot Valley's rich heritage. The Blackfoot Challenge is a collaborative of local landowners and conservationists who facilitate the longest-running range-rider program in the country—not to mention carnivore monitoring and human-bear conflict reduction programs within communities. Each summer, range riders monitor livestock and carnivores across 40,000 acres of rugged country, checking herd health, updating ranchers and community members on wolf and grizzly travel, and detecting and removing carcasses from high-risk sites. Simply put, these hard-working individuals stop conflicts before they happen. We're very proud to have backed them again this year.

Biologists Tyler Vent, left, and Alex Welander fit a young male grizzly with a GPS collar near Sullivan Lake in the Selkirk Mountains of northeast Washington. The event, which occurred in late June 2016, marked Washington's first grizzly capture in more than 30 years, and it happened just 30 miles from Bennett Meadows, a Vital Ground partner project.

—Photo by U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Grizzly Captured in Northeast Washington

Slowly but surely, grizzly bears are returning to Washington state, and Vital Ground is already lending a helping hand. The news came last summer when a multi-agency team of wildlife biologists captured and radio-collared a young male bear in the Selkirk Mountains of northeast Washington. The event, which occurred near Sullivan Lake in Pend Oreille County, marked the state's first grizzly capture in more than 30 years, according to a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Three months after the capture, the five-year old, 365-pound bear may have found its way onto Vital Ground. That's because just over 30 miles are all that separate the collaring site from Bennett Meadows, a lush, wildlife-rich zone that Vital Ground helped conserve in 2014.

Vital Ground Receives $15,000 Grant to Protect Wildlife Habitat

The Cross Charitable Foundation contributed $15,000 to complete The Vital Ground Foundation's Weber Gulch acquisition in northwest Montana (See the fall 2016 issue of *Vital News, page 3)*. Cross joins Vital Ground partners Montana Fish & Wildlife Conservation Trust, Cinnabar Foundation, Chicago Zoological Society, AZA Conservation Grants Fund, Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative, First Security Bank, First Interstate Bancsystem Foundation, the William H. Donner Foundation and many Vital Ground donors to secure and protect this 40-acre private inholding from road building and development. Vital Ground is working to convey the property to the U.S. Forest Service. This land acquisition is significant because it permanently protects the integrity of the Cube Iron-Silcox Inventoried Roadless Area and maintains critical wildlife habitat for grizzly bears, black bears, mountain lions, moose, white-tailed deer and other related species.

Amazon Smile

If you're not already using AmazonSmile when you shop, consider starting now! Smile gives Amazon shoppers a way to donate a percentage of their purchases to their favorite charity. Support Vital Ground and wildlife habitat conservation by going to Amazon at https://smile.amazon.com/ch/87-0483446 and assign Vital Ground as your beneficiary. Shop through the Smile link every time you order items on Amazon. The bears can't thank you enough!

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You shop. Amazon gives.

Bear photo by Joe Riis

Vital Ground board member, biologist and book author Doug Chadwick shared extraordinary stories and fascinating images during February Gobi grizzly presentations in Wyoming and Montana.

Upper right: In Jackson, Wyo., Chadwick points out grizzly recovery areas in the northern Rockies; Center inset, right to left: Vital Ground Executive Director Ryan Lutey; Doug Chadwick; Vital Ground board member Andrea Nasi, and; renowned wildlife/nature photographer Thomas Mangelsen; Lower-right: a crowd mingles before Chadwick's talk at Jackson's Center for the Arts Theatre.

Gobi Grizzlies Highlight 3 Events

Vital Ground board member, biologist and book author Doug Chadwick is sharing his knowledge of the Gobi bear's fight for survival in one of the toughest, most remote regions on Earth—the Gobi Desert.

Chadwick's presentations come on the heels of his newest book, *Tracking Gobi Grizzlies: Surviving Beyond the Back of Beyond* (with photographs by Joe Riis). The book and Chadwick's presentations illustrate why saving this endangered animal supports an entire ecosystem made up of hundreds of interconnected plants and animals—from desert roses to Asiatic lynx and wild double-humped camels—all adapting as best they can to the effects of climate change.

In February, two events were held in Jackson, Wyoming—one at Mangelsen Gallery and hosted by long-time Vital Ground supporter Thomas D. Mangelsen, and the other at the Center for the Arts Theatre. A few nights later Vital Ground hosted an event at Fort Missoula.

Vital Ground has supported the Gobi bear project since 2012, and *Tracking Gobi Grizzlies* is available in Vital Ground's Bear Mart on line!

Parker Ridge Fires Gives Birth to Profusion of Plant Life

On a warm afternoon in late July 2015, thunderheads built on the northern Idaho panhandle. As the wind picked up and storm clouds grew, lighting struck the top of Parker Ridge and ignited a small fire, but two days elapsed before signs of smoke became visible. The following days brought more hot, dry weather, stoking the flames. Over the next several weeks, hundreds of firefighters and the local community worked to gain control of the Parker Ridge Fire. It wasn't until the seasons changed and cooler, wet weather arrived in late September that the enormous fire would be contained. In the end, nearly 7,000 acres burned, including a 42-acre Vital Ground property donated in 2005 by Sig and Anne Weiler, on the bench above the Kootenai River just south of the Canadian border.

But when nearly 7,000 acres burn, not all is lost. In fact, the ecological clock is reset. What was once an overgrown forest with little or no sunlight reaching the forest floor is now an abundant mosaic of new forbs and shrubs. The nutrient-rich soils are alive again. Wildlife, like grizzly bears, depend on revegetated understory as an important food source in the spring as they forage the increased supply of grasses, forbs and roots.

Remote forest landscapes like the Weiler Property can restore themselves over time, but in many cases areas become susceptible to erosion and invasive non-native plants. Vital Ground is committed to ensuring that passing grizzly bears, elk, deer and other wildlife have bountiful, native plants to forage.

In the spring following the Parker Ridge Fire, Vital Ground, with funding through the Cadeau Grant, worked with partners at the Natural Resources Conservation Service to plant over 8,000 Western larch, white pine and ponderosa pine seedlings. A mix of native grass seeds were spread to ensure that in the coming years noxious weeds would not be the first to take hold in the fertile soils.

The results were astounding! Mitch Doherty, Vital Ground's land steward, visited the property in the fall of 2016 and found that Vital Ground's investment in forest restoration paid dividends. Western larch and pine seedlings took root and grew over one foot in a single growing season. Wildflowers and native grasses now dominate the open forest floor. Invasive noxious weeds are now in low manageable numbers. But the work is far from over.

In the coming years, treatments aimed at non-native invasives will continue, and in time healthy saplings will need a prescription for management. In the end, wildlife will have the habitat they need. And grizzly bears will have abundant logs to turn over to find a nourishing meal.

—Mitch Doherty

Spring 2016: The ecological clock was reset after the north Idaho Parker Ridge Fire burned 7,000 acres including the 42-acre Weiler Property owned by Vital Ground.

Photo by Mitch Doherty

Fall 2016: Re-vegetation efforts spurred an abundance of plant life, thanks to help from the Cadeau Foundation, the Natural Resources Conservation Services and people like you.

Photo by Gael Bissell

Growing UP Grizzly

Built on instinct, driven by hunger, honed by imitation, a grizzly cub's first year is nothing short of incredible

Story and Photos by Tim Christie

The movement is subtle, unfelt by the sow immersed in groggy, hibernating slumber. Little feet of a blind, hairless and toothless cub inch their way through thick hair, innately knowing the way to life-nurturing milk. A second coffee-cup-sized cub finds its way to its mother's nipple. Ensconced in a deep hole dug last fall under the giant root well of a fallen tree, the three nestle together, insulated from subzero temperatures by a heavy layer of snow.

There is little to worry about right now, unless Mom doesn't have enough fat reserves to make it to spring. But since she gave birth, that worry is unlikely. Grizzly bears (*Ursus arctos horribilis*) possess special adaptive characteristics that ensure mothers and cubs a chance at survival.

This midwinter miracle of life is repeated thousands of times each year. It extends throughout the grizzly bear's range which runs through the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem at the corners of Wyoming, Idaho and Montana, up into the Lewis, Swan, Cabinet and Selkirk ranges that sprawl from northwestern Montana across the Idaho border, and on up through northwestern Canada into Alaska.

Though their species spans thousands of miles across the continent, this furry family buried under the snow will likely keep to themselves when they awake, relying on instinct and centuries of instruction passed from sow to cub as their tools. Spring is coming. Adventure awaits. Soon the cubs will begin their life journey, the journey of growing up grizzly.

LIFE, SUSPENDED

The story of the birth of these cubs is incomplete without explanation of the incredible process of conception.

Grizzlies breed between May and July. Once bred, what happens is virtually magic. Instead of developing immediately in the uterus, fertilized eggs are held, suspended until October or November as the sow approaches hibernation. After a good summer, rich with food sources that have added vital fat reserves to sustain her winter sojourn, the eggs implant in the uterus. If she is nutritionally lacking or otherwise unhealthy as fall comes on, the sow's body reabsorbs the eggs. Consuming adequate fat-generating food from spring to fall determines both her health and reproductive ability.

It's part of a check-and-balance system ursines employ. Adulthood comes quickly to many other mammals. Some species, like rabbits, breed and reproduce within a year of birth. Female elk calves can breed at one year of age. But female grizzlies aren't mature enough to breed until they are 4 years old, and often wait until their fifth spring. While males, called boars, sexually mature after about three and a half years, few breed until they are 5 or 6. Older, larger males don't take kindly to young competitors.

AWAKING HUNGER

Spring sunshine bathes snowy hillsides with warmth, stirring life in the high country. Inside the den, the sow has nursed the cubs now for months, depleting her reserves and rousing her from her winter-long nap. Clawing through the snowy blanket that had protected her and the cubs, she steps into the brilliant sunshine. Furry bundles follow, seeing for the first time the landscape they'll spend their lives exploring.

Leading her two cubs off the snowy mountain to greening grass, the sow finds a meadow replete with blooming dandelions. She'll eat grass, but prefers nipping the yellow flowers; they offer more protein than the greens.

Sows with newborns are late leaving winter dens. Boars exit their own dens first, followed by cub-less females and sows with older cubs. For all, hunger drives every movement. Snow-covered landscapes offer little nourishment, so grizzlies follow paths that memory or their sense of smell tells them lead to food.

People often find it surprising to see alpha predators in a snow-dotted meadow grazing on newly exposed green grass like cattle. But grizzlies are omnivores, eating nutritional foods including nuts, leaves, roots, tubers, insects and any animal life they can find. They prey on animals; but unlike true carnivores, their diet doesn't depend solely on meat.

Never far from her sight, the cubs sniff, scratch, run, climb, explore, play and wrestle with one another. Just out of the den, their only attention to a blade of grass is testing its texture with their mouth, still unaware it's edible. Mom's their grocery store for now. Several times a day she'll sit or lie down to nurse the cubs as they make sounds somewhere between purring and a puttering motorboat. Meals are not long affairs. When Mom gets up, she frequently rolls still-nursing cubs to the ground.

A MOTHER'S MISSION

The sow has three charges: protect her cubs; find food to sustain them all; and teach her cubs to survive.

Lessons are modeled to unsuspecting cubs that are in the process of developing life-sustaining skill sets. Learning Mom's habits is crucial to survival.

I once photographed a female brown bear with triplet cubs of the year in Alaska digging for clams. At those northernmost reaches of their populations, geography makes a difference as to what these bears are called. In coastal areas, they are known as brown bears. When found further inland, they are known as grizzlies. Initially this brown bear would dig up a clam, crack the shell and give it to a cub. After doing that several times for each cub, she'd dig up a clam and give it unopened to the cub. Understanding good stuff was in there, it had to figure out how to unwrap it. Frustration was obvious, yet the little ones soon unraveled that piece of the food puzzle.

Sows fiercely protect cubs from any perceived or real threat. As with most wildlife, newly born additions are highly susceptible to multiple risks. Approximately half of cubs die in the first year, falling to disease, starvation and predation. In the wild, boars pose a sow's biggest worry, but wolves, mountain lions, even coyotes also prey on cubs. Humans blundering into close proximity of a female with cubs also can expect her wrath, commonly resulting in physical injury, even death.

While photographing a white-tailed buck several years ago, a sow with a cub crossed my path. Seeing me, the cub bawled, then disappeared. Dropping my camera, I climbed a tree, all the while hearing the sow rushing for me. Her anger was palpable, like a junkyard dog. Halfway up the tree, she caught me. She grabbed my heel; I kicked at her, and my running shoe slipped off. Losing her balance, she fell to the ground, shearing the branches from the tree as she went. Obviously she was offended I'd scared her baby, despite me being at least 75 yards from the cub when it bawled.

A friend had a much more serious encounter while hiking in Yellowstone National Park when he stumbled onto a sow with two cubs in their daybed. The sow severely bit him in the shoulder and ripped his scalp. He played

dead, prompting her to leave. He survived but wears scars of the encounter.

Despite a sow's fierce protective nature against all threats, grizzly cub mortality can be high. Couple that with the fact that females only breed every three years on average, and it means grizzly bears have one of the lowest population growth rates of all North American mammals.

MOTHERING VS. SURVIVING

By late fall, what began as hairless, blind, pound-sized cubs are now miniature replicas of Mom, weighing 60-75 pounds each.

And so is introduced one of nature's greatest struggles: the sow's mothering instinct versus survival. Driven by a maniacal feeding frenzy, fall is the final push to put on all the fat possible before hibernation. Cubs are still nursing, so the sow needs to have enough fat reserves to survive hibernation. She is searching for as much food as she can find.

Grizzlies in Greater Yellowstone can strike it rich on dining options during hunting seasons — when elk, moose and deer gut piles are left on the ground. But those treats come with possible consequences. An edgy, potentially deadly human-bear conflict can be created in the backcountry when grizzlies take possession of wild game quarters that haven't yet been retrieved by hunters. Fortunately for all involved, hunters have worked hard to reduce these conflicts.

Sows that teach cubs to tolerate or invade human domains — both in the wild and in suburban areas — promise generational problems of conflict. As bears expand into more human-dominated landscapes, these occurrences are on the rise. But good moms steer clear of humans, modeling the wisdom of maintaining appropriate distances.

Cubs are sponges, soaking up everything Mom does. And Mom is the ultimate authority, the sage on what her young should or shouldn't do. She rules with an iron will.

Photographing a sow with two cubs a year ago, I witnessed this disciplinary wrath firsthand. I don't know what one cub did, but she whirled around, grabbing its neck in her mouth, shaking it and pinning it to the ground. The cub's ear-piercing bawl only spurred the sow to shake it harder. Releasing him, he slinked off a couple yards. Twenty minutes later, the sow and cubs were playfully wrestling together in the grass.

Discipline hones survival. The cubs have mere years to learn it all before they live alone. Grizzlies eke out life in solitude, gathering together only for romance or forced into close quarters by concentrated food sources like berries, fish, whitebark pine nuts or army cutworm moths (also known as miller moths) along high country rockslides.

At the cub's elevation, summer yields to autumn once again. Retreating into hibernation, the sow must be healthy and fat. Now much larger, the cubs continue to nurse, relying on the sow to survive the long winter nap.

Flakes of snow the size of wood chips slowly twist and float to the ground, piling deep over their winter quarters. In five to six months, they'll leave hibernation for another summer of tutoring.

The sow has done all she can to protect, nurse and teach what began early this year as helpless beings. They're not yet ready to live on their own; more lessons await next year. It takes time to grow up in grizzly country. Time, it seems, well spent.

—Tim Christie, a full-time freelance writer and nature photographer, has hunted and photographed throughout North America and Africa. View and purchase his images on his website, timchristiephoto.com. This article is reprinted from Wyoming Wildlife magazine.

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