The Vital Ground Foundation

Biennial Report

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Vital Ground

Where the Grizzly Can Walk, The Earth is Healthy and Whole

Welcome

The past two years were certainly challenging for individuals, businesses and nonprofit organizations—especially those that depend upon the good will of charitable donors to carry out their work. Vital Ground certainly faced many challenges associated with the gut-wrenching economy, but we're proud to report that Vital Ground not only survived the "Great Recession" of 2008 and 2009, but thrived!

Vital Ground prides itself in being a lean yet highly successful organization dedicated to one mission—*ensuring the recovery and long-term survival of grizzly bears, together with the many native species that share their range, through the protection and restoration of core habitats and landscape linkages*.

Through the efforts of Vital Ground and its partners, 187,000 acres of crucial wildlife habitat was protected or enhanced during the 2008-2009 biennium. We made significant progress on our long-term plan to permanently protect north Idaho's Bismark Meadows; partnered with Nature Conservancy Canada to protect 136,000 acres in the Canadian Selkirks; partnered with the National Wildlife Federation to retire a 34,500-acre grazing allotment near Yellowstone National Park; negotiated several conservation easement agreements to protect grizzly bear habitat in Idaho and Montana; and launched a new initiative to protect crucial habitat linkages in the Selkirk and Cabinet-Yaak ecosystems. And while accomplishing these great things for wildlife and wild places, we were also able to build our capacity and increase our net assets by 48%!

None of this would have been possible without the generous support of our many loyal and dedicated members and donors, and we pledge to put every dollar to work as efficiently and effectively as possible. Thank you for your support!

Yours in Conservation,

Robert W. Koons
Chair, Board of Trustees

Gary J. Wolfe
Executive Director

Our Vision

Vital Ground works to ensure the recovery and long-term survival of grizzly bears, together with the many native species that share their range, through the protection and restoration of core habitats and landscape linkages.

Our mission is to protect and restore North America's grizzly bear populations by conserving wildlife habitat for future generations. We protect crucial lands that grizzlies need to survive—not only for the great bears themselves, but for birds and butterflies, elk, lynx, trout and all the other creatures that share their world.

Vital Ground believes the grizzly bear, as an umbrella species, is nature's barometer of a healthy and complete ecosystem. Because a grizzly's home range covers several hundred square miles—from alpine meadows to valley bottoms—protecting grizzly habitat benefits entire plant and animal communities in the wildest, most scenic places left on the continent.

Grizzly and other brown bear populations have persisted in some of the continent's last wilderness ecosystems. Yet on private lands between, within, and at the edges of these ecosystems, roads and development are rapidly filling open lands and valley floors, eroding once-open landscapes and creating "habitat fracture zones."

Habitat links between these wild grizzly sanctuaries—private lands that provide food, shelter and security for seasonal foraging and movement—are the crux point of grizzly survival and recovery. Today many of these lands are still clad in streamside willows and cottonwoods, pastures, grasslands, wet meadows, clear waters, and conifer forests—habitat for innumerable species. Tomorrow, if not protected, they could be peppered with homes, roads, and other developments.

This is where Vital Ground targets our resources and efforts. Acre by acre, we protect jigsaw puzzle pieces of habitat to maintain the lifelines between grizzly ecosystems. Lifelines that will help sustain bears and everything else that depends on grizzly country.

Cover photo by Robert Scriba

Photo by Lance Schelvan

One Bear's Legacy

Only those able to see the pageant of evolution can be expected to value its theater, the wilderness, or its outstanding achievement, the grizzly.

—Aldo Leopold
A Sand County Almanac

Vital Ground will remain the finest thing we have ever done with our lives.

—Doug and Lynne Seus
Founders of Vital Ground

Vital Ground evolved from a unique relationship between a man and a bear. In 1977, a Kodiak brown bear cub born in captivity arrived in the lives of Doug and Lynne Seus, professional animal trainers. Dubbing him Bart, the Seuses raised the cub from a six-pound ball of fuzz to a 1,500-pound adult bear and trained him for work in the film business. Bart quickly became a beloved member of the Seus family and developed a lifelong bond of trust and loyalty with Doug.

Bart loved the applause of film crews as much as his salmon and blueberries, and he eventually appeared in more than 35 films, including *Legends of the Fall*, *The Edge* and *The Bear*. "For 23 years he took us on grand adventures—from the majestic peaks of the Austrian Alps and the Alaska wilds, to the bejeweled backstage of the Academy Awards," recalls Lynne.

Inspired to act on behalf of Bart's wild relatives, in 1990 the Seuses launched The Vital Ground Foundation with an initial purchase of 240 acres of prime grizzly bear habitat in Montana—habitat that adjoins other protected land along the eastern front of the Rocky Mountains. The Seuses felt that Bart, as a member of a species truly symbolic of wilderness, could deliver a powerful message in support of land conservation. Bart took on an important new role as ambassador for Vital Ground. Until his death in 2000, his public appearances with Doug and Lynne sought to convey the urgent predicament of our rapidly diminishing natural areas, while promoting a message of hope that we might become better stewards of these great lands.

Over the past twenty years, Vital Ground has helped protect and enhance nearly 600,000 acres of wildlife habitat. Although Bart lived his life in captivity, he left a legacy that allows many of his wild brothers and sisters to roam free.

Photo by Jon Freeman

Bart the Bear and Doug Seus

Where Grizzlies Walk

Before European settlement, 50,000 to 100,000 grizzly bears ranged from Mexico to Alaska, across North America's vast prairies, wetlands, forests and mountainsides. Also known as the brown bear (*Ursus arctos*), the grizzly is considered a "keystone species" that influences the diversity of other species in the ecosystems it inhabits. As a top predator, the grizzly affects the number and distribution of prey species and other predators. Foraging on berries and herbs, bears disperse seeds and so promote a variety of plant life. As grizzlies dig for tubers, insects and rodents, they loosen topsoil and help renew nutrients. And where coastal grizzlies dine on salmon, they spread nitrogen and other marine elements well beyond streams into upland habitats.

Due to the grizzly's extensive home range and need for wild land, undisturbed denning habitat, and abundant native berry crops and prey—from grubs and ground squirrels to deer and elk—the condition of a grizzly population is nature's barometer of a healthy and complete ecosystem.

Today, approximately 1,500 grizzlies remain in the lower 48 states, refugees of a long history of persecution and the sweep of settlement and development that consumed 98% of the bear's historic range in the conterminous states. In 1975, the grizzly was listed under the Endangered Species Act as "threatened" in the U.S. south of Canada. The populations that remain survive in five distinct ecosystems, sustained by wild habitat in our national parks, national forests and wilderness areas:

- Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem
- Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem
- Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem
- Selkirk Ecosystem
- Northern Cascades Ecosystem

The Yellowstone and Northern Continental Divide grizzly populations are currently the most robust of all the populations in the lower 48, having grown steadily through the benefit of years of cooperative agency management and investment in recovery. These two populations are slowly expanding their ranges out of protected areas and increasingly into landscapes with private lands.

The Yellowstone grizzly was briefly removed from protection under the Endangered Species Act, having met all of the criteria for population recovery. However, controversy continues to simmer over threats to the Yellowstone population. Some conservationists have voiced concern over the status of grizzly food sources in the ecosystem, particularly the widespread decline of whitebark pine due to blister rust disease, which may be

Photo by Robert Scriba

linked to climate change. Subsequently, in the fall of 2009 a federal judge reversed the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's delisting decision and the population is once again listed as threatened.

Regardless of legal status, the long-term survival of grizzlies in these ecosystems will depend on secure habitat outside protected parks and wilderness areas as fluctuating habitat conditions and expanding populations push bears into historic ranges to seek landscapes with abundant food resources.

Straddling the Montana-Idaho border, the Selway-Bitterroot Ecosystem is designated as a sixth recovery zone. Although grizzlies were once widespread and abundant in the region, for 60 years there was no verified evidence of the Great Bear in the Selway-Bitterroot. That changed in 2007 when a grizzly was mistakenly shot by a black bear hunter in the northern Bitterroot Mountains. DNA analysis revealed that this bear had traveled from the Selkirk Mountains, more than 140 air miles northwest of the Bitterroots, spotlighting the potential for grizzlies to reclaim historic range and the urgent need to protect habitat links between populations.

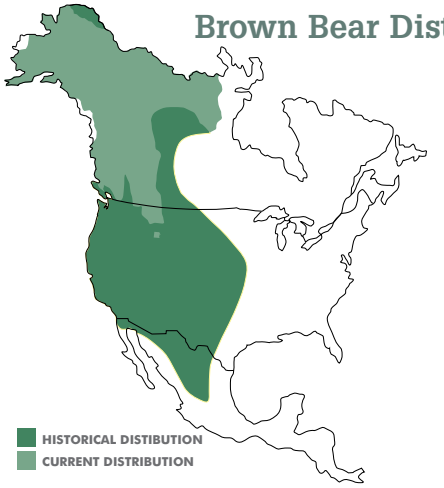
Despite a core of protected lands in each of these ecosystems, the long-term persistence of the grizzly depends on plenty of room to roam. Connections between these ecosystems and with populations in Canada are vital to the bear's survival.

Today, some of the most important linkage areas and most productive seasonal feeding habitats for grizzlies lie on private ground.

Lands along streams, valley bottoms, and in lower elevations provide essential spring and summer range and corridors for movement. Yet people also love these special places for their stunning beauty, abundant wildlife, and recreational opportunities. Development is consuming lowland wildlife habitats at a staggering rate, isolating grizzly ecosystems from one another and jeopardizing the enduring survival of these populations.

Alaska remains the largest stronghold for the Great Bear in the U.S., with an estimated 25,000 to 39,000 brown bears—about 95% of the U.S. population (Miller and Schoen 1999.) Yet as the state continues to develop, humans and bears come into increasing conflict over vital habitat. Even Alaska's wilds are not limitless, and habitat conservation is becoming ever more important for brown bears to continue to thrive in the land of the midnight sun.

Historic and Current Brown Bear Distribution



Grizzly Recovery Zones

Making Connections: Conserving Vital Ground

We cannot maintain sensitive species in much of the Rocky Mountains if the crucial private lands continue to be developed at the current rate.

—Dr. Chris Servheen Grizzly Bear Recovery Coordinator – Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee

Vital Ground protects critical grizzly bear habitat through cooperative conservation partnerships. We focus on strategically located lands whose conservation values transcend property boundaries. On private properties, we partner with willing landowners to protect vital habitat through conservation easements and fee title acquisitions, either by purchase or donation. Vital Ground also participates in selected projects on public lands designed to reduce conflicts between bears and people, improve habitat quality, protect or enhance resident populations, or increase the land's carrying capacity for grizzly bears.

Vital Ground works wherever there is an opportunity to protect habitat for grizzlies, but we direct particular attention to private lands that serve as connections between grizzly ecosystems, special foraging areas or seasonal bear habitat—lifelines that grizzlies, and everything else in grizzly country, depend upon. Much of our attention is devoted to projects in the Rocky Mountain states of Montana, Idaho and Wyoming, yet we have also made important contributions to habitat projects in Alaska and British Columbia. By directing Vital Ground's resources toward protecting the crucial links that connect grizzly ecosystems, we hope to help sustain grizzly populations from Yellowstone to Canada and Alaska.

Vital Ground conducts all of its activities in accordance with the Land Trust Alliance's Standards and Practices, the guiding principles of the land trust community. Our strategy is directed by the best scientific information available concerning grizzly bear biology, habitat requirements and conservation strategies. Vital Ground does not engage in partisan politics. Rather, we seek practical, local solutions that allow people, grizzlies, and other wildlife to coexist.

Partnerships are essential to our success. Rapidly rising land values throughout grizzly country pose ever greater fund raising challenges for habitat conservation. We collaborate with landowners, state and federal agencies and other nonprofit groups to leverage funds and build cooperative conservation projects. Working with our many partners, Vital Ground has so far helped conserve nearly 600,000 acres of wildlife habitat.

As the pressures of rural development, resource extraction, and climate change continue to threaten wild places, Vital Ground remains committed to securing habitat that the Great Bear and other wildlife can rely upon.

If we can enable the long-term survival and growth of grizzly bear populations, we can help sustain North America's wild heritage for our children and many future generations.

Photo by Lance Schelvan

Bear Tracks: Highlights of our 2008–2009 conservation achievements

In 2008 and 2009, Vital Ground made great strides in on-the-ground habitat conservation for grizzly bears and other wildlife. During the 2008–2009 biennium, Vital Ground helped to protect and enhance nearly 187,000 acres of crucial wildlife habitat. Here are highlights of our 2008–2009 conservation achievements.

NORTHERN CONTINENTAL DIVIDE ECOSYSTEM (NCDE)

This diverse and rugged region sits astride the "Crown of the Continent" of northwestern Montana and encompasses roughly 9,600 square miles, including Glacier National Park, surrounding national forests, the Bob Marshall wilderness complex and other wilderness areas, and intermingled private lands. The ecosystem supports at least 765 grizzlies (Kendall et al. 2009) and the population is expanding out of the wilderness heart of the NCDE into historic range. Bears seeking new territories are increasingly using habitats on private lands, including the prairie rangelands east of the Rocky Mountain Front and intermountain valleys to the south and west. Yet highways, a major railroad, and increasing development are fragmenting the landscape and posing hazards to grizzlies. In its twenty year history, Vital Ground has so far helped protect 32,327 acres of grizzly habitat throughout the NCDE.

Photo by Robert Scriba

Schatz Family Conservation Easement—A Crucial Link on the Continental Divide 1

In 2008, Vital Ground provided a grant to Prickly Pear Land Trust to help secure a conservation easement to permanently protect an undeveloped 1,565-acre ranch in a vital wildlife corridor on the Continental Divide near Helena, Montana. Homesteaded in 1865, the ranch has been operated by five generations of the Schatz family.

The property adjoins Forest Service and Montana state lands and remains undeveloped except for an historic cabin that once served as a stage coach stop.

Photo by Jamie Scarrow

Rolling grass meadows give way to mountain slopes dominated by mixed conifer forests and quaking aspen. Fourteen natural springs bubble up on the property and two creeks flow across the ranch. Grizzlies and lynx have been documented in the area and more than 100 elk range across the ranch.

The Schatz family worked with Prickly Pear Land Trust to craft an easement that allows the family to continue ranching operations and maintain a tradition of permitted, public walk-in access for hunting and fishing. "This is the only protected private property in this critical bottleneck that serves as a connection between the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem and lands to the south," said Diane Boyd of Prickly Pear. In addition to Vital Ground's grant, the project was supported by several funding partners, including the Montana Fish & Wildlife Conservation Trust, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the Charlotte Y. Martin Foundation, and The Cinnabar Foundation.

Cedar Creek Conservation Easement: Our First Project in the North Fork of the Flathead 2

Sandwiched between the Flathead National Forest and Glacier National Park, the North Fork of the Flathead River flows south out of British Columbia through some of Montana's most spectacular grizzly country. Yet as this wild and scenic river approaches its confluence with the Middle Fork of the Flathead near the town of Columbia Falls, development and recreation swell, placing pressure on the valley's wildlife. American Rivers recently designated the North Fork one of the five most endangered rivers in America.

Late in 2009, Vital Ground partnered with landowners Ed and Teresa Levert and Catherine Deans-Barrett to permanently protect 160 acres on Cedar Creek in the Flathead Valley, just north of Columbia Falls. The property stands out as an intact forest in an area that has faced intense development pressure. Sitting between the Whitefish Range to the west and the Livingston Range to the east, the property remains a valuable link for wildlife movement between these two ecosystems.

The owners have managed their land to revitalize forest cover, protect water quality and wetlands, and enhance habitat for wildlife. The Cedar Creek property now supports habitat for bears, moose, elk, deer,

songbirds, hawks, and an abundance of other species. State wildlife biologists have documented a radio-collared female grizzly passing through the Cedar Creek drainage on more than one occasion. "It is quite likely that she has spent time on this property that Vital Ground has worked to protect," reports Tim Manley, Fish Wildlife and Parks bear manager.

This project was completed with support from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, the Montana Forest Legacy Program, and a generous donation from the landowners of the full value of the conservation easement. The Cinnabar Foundation also provided a grant to support stewardship planning and implementation.

SELKIRK ECOSYSTEM

Located in northernmost Idaho and the northeast corner of Washington, the 2,200- square-mile Selkirk Ecosystem is the smallest of the grizzly recovery zones and home to a population of only 40 to 50 grizzlies (Servheen 2006) on the U.S. side of the border. This region is a narrow peninsula of grizzly habitat that extends down from Canada, yet research indicates that the Selkirk bears in the U.S. are now genetically isolated from other populations. Maintaining habitat connections to bears in Canada to the north and in the Cabinet–Yaak Ecosystem to the east is essential to sustain and recover the Selkirk population. So far, Vital Ground has helped protect more than 137,000 acres in the Selkirk ecosystem.

BISMARK MEADOWS: A SPRINGTIME GRIZZLY MAGNET 3

Since 2001, Vital Ground has been working to protect Bismark Meadows, a unique meadow habitat in the Selkirk Mountains of northern Idaho. The area encompasses an 1,100-acre complex of wet meadows and forested uplands that support a dramatic array of rare flora and fauna. The meadows are vitally important seasonal habitat for the imperiled Selkirk grizzlies. In spring, when bears emerge from hibernation in the snow-bound Selkirk Mountains, they seek food in valley bottoms. Bismark Meadows provides a safe haven and protein-rich grasses and forbs for these hungry bears.

The Idaho Department of Fish and Game has documented consistent use of the meadows each spring by grizzly bears—including sows with cubs. This is particularly significant given that less than 100 grizzly bears are estimated to live in the entire Selkirk Ecosystem spanning northern Idaho and southern British Columbia, and about half of those bears inhabit the U.S. portion of the ecosystem.

Direct acquisition of land and conservation easements are becoming increasingly important tools for wildlife conservation in North America, and Vital Ground plays an important role in this effort for grizzly bears in the trans-border area of the US and Canada.

—Dr. Michael Proctor
Trans-border Grizzly Bear Project, Canadian Project Leader

Photo by Linda Lantzy

Development associated with private lands can create problems for wildlife, and in particular grizzly bears. Conserving open space in critical grizzly bear habitat, as proposed by Vital Ground, is key to allowing recovery to occur and minimizing the potential for conflicts with bad outcomes for bears and humans.

—Charles Corsi
Regional Supervisor
Idaho Department of Fish and Game

Residential or commercial development within Bismark Meadows would destroy the lush forage and safe haven the Selkirk grizzlies find here each spring. Vital Ground continues to work toward the long-term protection of all of Bismark Meadows. Vital Ground secured its first Bismark Meadows property in April 2005, acquiring a 19-acre parcel along State Highway 57. In 2008, we acquired a second 90-acre parcel, followed by the purchase of a 55-acre property in 2009. The last acquisition was made possible by the generosity of an anonymous conservation investor, who patiently held the land in good faith for eight years until Vital Ground could secure its purchase. This brings a total of 164 acres of high-value seasonal grizzly habitat into Vital Ground ownership at Bismark Meadows. We maintain contact with the remaining three landowners who hold property within the meadows, and hope to be "purchaser of choice" should those private parcels come onto the market.

These acquisitions were completed through Vital Ground's Selkirk Grizzly Bear Habitat Conservation Initiative. Additional support came from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation via the Northwest Wildlife Conservation Initiative, Doug and Lynne Seus, First Interstate Bank, First Interstate BancSystem Foundation, the Johnson Family Foundation, Oberweiler Foundation, Qureshi Family Foundation, Richard K. and Shirley S. Hemingway Foundation, Wiancko Charitable Foundation, William H. Donner Foundation, Yellowstone to Yukon Initiative, and numerous individual donations.

Photo by Lance Schelvan

DARKWOODS PROJECT: CANADA'S LARGEST PRIVATE CONSERVATION ACQUISITION 4

In 2008, Vital Ground became a fundraising partner in the largest single private land conservation acquisition in Canada's history. We entered into a memorandum of understanding with Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) to provide a $50,000 grant and other fundraising assistance over two years.

NCC's effort is a bold commitment to protect 136,000 acres (212 square miles) of remote valleys, mountains and lakes in an area known as Darkwoods in south-central British Columbia. The lands encompass old-growth forests, remote valleys, pristine creeks, alpine lakes, and habitat for rare and endangered wildlife from woodland caribou to grizzly bear. Pluto Darkwoods Forestry Corporation has owned and operated the property since 1967 and while much of the area was once harvested for timber, the opportunity to retain, protect, and restore

vast stretches of landscape for the benefit of wildlife, water and air quality, and local communities could not be missed.

Darkwoods is situated between the towns of Nelson, Salmo and Creston in the West Kootenay region of British Columbia. The property links a network of protected lands and wilderness management areas to create a vast tract covering more than 250,000 acres—enough space for wide-ranging animals such as grizzly bear and caribou to roam freely. The southern boundary of the Darkwoods property is only 15 miles north of Vital Ground's Boundary Creek projects in northern Idaho, and the only physical barrier between the two areas is Canada Highway 3.

"This is a unique and immediate opportunity to conserve a landscape roughly the size of the entire Island of Montreal," said John Lounds, president and CEO of the Nature Conservancy of Canada. "Darkwoods is a conservation initiative of global significance. It's part of a greater vision that will set new standards for conservation success."

Vital Ground received a $10,000 contribution from the Wildlife Land Trust/Humane Society International-Canada to launch the $50,000 fundraising goal for the project.

Photo by Jamie Scarrow

CABINET–YAAK ECOSYSTEM

The 2,600-square-mile Cabinet–Yaak Ecosystem encompasses the Cabinet and Purcell mountain ranges in northwestern Montana and northern Idaho. Only 35 to 45 bears survive in the ecosystem, and even this small population is divided. About 25 to 30 bears live in the northern part of the ecosystem, which is contiguous with grizzly habitat in Canada. However, only 10 to 15 grizzlies remain in the Cabinets south of the Kootenai River (Servheen 2006). Increasing development, highway traffic and a major railway with more than 40 trains a day fragment the ecosystem and exacerbate the challenges facing these few isolated bears. To date, Vital Ground has helped protect lands totaling 2,192 acres in the region.

Curley Creek Conservation Easements 5

In the far northeast corner of the Idaho Panhandle, Curley Creek runs along the base of the Purcell Mountain range through dense cedar–hemlock forests, sprawling wetlands and beaver ponds. Along its eight–mile course it wanders from Idaho to Montana and back again, running past farms and homes, and flows almost entirely through private lands.

Curley Creek also serves as the northwestern border of the Cabinet-Yaak Grizzly Bear

Photo by Robert Scriba

We fully support Vital Ground's efforts in these conservation acquisitions or easements for grizzly bear habitat. We recognize that the functional conservation of these small populations depends upon land conservation efforts like this.

—Dr. Chris Servheen
Grizzly Bear Recovery Coordinator, Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee

Recovery Zone. The wetlands and forest in this valley bottom provide early season forage for grizzlies coming out of dens on adjacent national forest lands. In 2009, Vital Ground secured two conservation easements that protect 110 acres in the Curley Creek drainage, ensuring the Cabinet-Yaak grizzlies have a little more room to roam.

Sam and Carolyn Testa came to Vital Ground seeking assistance to protect their lands from future development, and subsequently donated the full value of their conservation easements. The Testas' conservation easements are made even more valuable because they augment adjacent conservation properties protected by The Nature Conservancy of Idaho and the Wetland Reserve Program administered by the Natural Resource Conservation Services. Together with the Testa properties, this creates a complex of 772 acres of private conservation lands. This complex provides habitat to the grizzly bears in the nearby Yaak River Valley, which move frequently between the United States and Canada.

"As development occurs in the valley bottoms, the bears lose valuable low elevation spring range. By protecting these properties, Vital Ground offers an opportunity for the Yaak grizzly bears to move into the valleys with reduced potential for human conflict," said Wayne Kasworm, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service bear biologist.

BEAR-PROOFING DUMPSTER SITES IN TREGO, MONTANA 6

In addition to habitat protection, Vital Ground seeks opportunities to reduce human-bear conflicts and allow bears to move safely across the landscape. In spring of 2009, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) biologist Tim Their received phone call after phone call from frustrated residents reporting problem black bears in the vicinity of Trego.

"It always seemed that I was about 10 minutes behind these bears as they raided dumpsters, residential trash and bird feeders, and even harassed campers at a nearby U.S. Forest Service campground," reported Thier. The situation came to a head when Thier was forced to kill an especially persistent bear who had evaded trapping efforts and attempts at hazing.

A large part of the problem stemmed from the garbage collection site in Trego, Montana, a short distance west of the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE). "Although it has only been black bears visiting the dumpsters, with the increased presence of grizzly bears in the area, we knew that it could be a grizzly bear getting into trouble next." stated Thier.

With the support of the Lincoln County Environmental Health Department, Thier began to identify partners to back a bear-

proof fencing and electrification project at the site, and Vital Ground agreed to facilitate a grant application to FWP's Living With Wildlife Program. The grant was quickly matched through the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, run by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway agreed to provide the balance of the funds through the Great Northern Environmental Stewardship Area (GNESA) Partnership. With dumpster-proofing completed in the fall, both black bears and grizzlies have less chance of getting into trouble in Trego.

Photo by Robert Scriba

Cabinet–Purcell Wildlife Linkage Initiative 7

For grizzly populations to survive in the long term, bears must be able to move freely across landscapes to access suitable habitat and neighboring bear populations. Yet conserving wildlife corridors between core protected areas—those same areas where people have their homes, ranches, roads and towns—is no simple task.

In 2007, Vital Ground created the Cabinet–Purcell Wildlife Linkage Initiative to focus habitat conservation on the weakest links for bear survival in northwestern Montana, a region deemed critical to recovering the grizzly bear population in the Northern Rockies. The initiative is a trans-border effort to protect habitat corridors that will help maintain wildlife movement between Canada's Selkirk and Purcell Mountains into Montana's Cabinet and Purcell Mountains—where dwindling grizzly bear populations are tenuously isolated—and allow grizzlies to move between this region and adjacent habitat in Idaho's Selkirk Mountains to the west and the Bitterroot Mountains to the south.

Through strong partnerships with biologists, conservationists, local communities and landowners, Vital Ground has identified the most critical corridors in the Cabinet–Purcell region and develop a strategic land conservation plan for conserving these vital links. Through these partnerships we intend to implement land conservation projects that, in the long-term, will allow an animal to find its way safely from Kootenay Lake in British Columbia south to the Bitterroot Mountains of Montana and Idaho.

Vital Ground launched the initiative through a Memorandum of Understanding with the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y) to increase regional capacity for private land conservation. A $100,000 grant provided by Y2Y allowed

We don't need to protect thousands and thousands of additional acres; but hundreds of acres in exactly the right places.

—Douglas Chadwick
Wildlife biologist, author, and Vital Ground board member

Bear Tracks

Vital Ground to hire Sarah Canepa, as our Land Conservation Specialist, to coordinate land conservation efforts from her home base in Troy, Montana, in the heart of the Cabinet–Purcell Region. The Wilburforce Foundation provided additional support with a capacity grant via the Heart of the Rockies Initiative.

As our first step, Sarah was charged with coordinating a private lands working group, which helped Vital Ground to identify wildlife linkage zones across the Cabinet–Purcell landscape and prioritize private lands within these corridors. This working group includes local residents, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Grizzly Bear Recovery Coordinator's office, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, the Trans-Border Grizzly Project, and Y2Y. The group focused its attention on addressing two fracture zones along U.S. Highway 2 and Highway 200—linkage areas considered critical for long term sustainability of grizzly bear populations in the region.

These efforts attracted the attention of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, which subsequently awarded a $50,000 grant to continue our private land conservation efforts in the Cabinet–Purcell region. By developing a region-wide plan for land conservation, Vital Ground can now present a strong case that targeting our conservation efforts toward private lands in strategic locations will ultimately support the long-term viability of grizzlies throughout the Northern Rockies.

"In the past five years, the Cabinet Purcell region has faced a rapid pace of residential development in areas critical to wildlife linkage," states Wayne Kasworm, USFWS grizzly bear biologist. "The work that Vital Ground has done to identify priority private lands and to work with landowners to pursue conservation options, has allowed us to take an important step towards recovery and long-term conservation of the Cabinet-Yaak grizzly bear population."

GREATER YELLOWSTONE ECOSYSTEM (GYE)

Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks form the heart of this vast ecosystem that stretches across nearly 20 million acres, and includes parts of four national forests, as well as wildlife refuges and private lands. From a low point in the 1970s, the Yellowstone grizzly population has gradually recovered, expanding both in numbers and range, and now totals at least 600 bears (Servheen 2006). This is the only grizzly population in the lower 48 states that has met all the original criteria set for recovery. Although briefly delisted from threatened status by the U.S. Fish

Photo by Robert Scriba

and Wildlife Service, concerns remain over the population's viability, particularly in a changing climate. In 2009 a federal judge reversed the delisting decision and these bears are now once again listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

The growing Yellowstone population is now pushing into historic range well outside the national parks. As bears re-colonize habitat beyond core protected areas and encounter escalating human development and activities throughout the ecosystem, Vital Ground will continue its efforts to provide GYE grizzlies room to roam. So far, Vital Ground has contributed toward the protection and enhancement of more than 413,000 acres in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, principally through grants to help retire grazing leases on public lands where there is a history of conflicts between predators and livestock.

DUNOIR GRAZING ALLOTMENT RETIREMENT 8

Since 2002, the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) has worked to retire livestock grazing allotments on public lands in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem where there are chronic conflicts with wildlife, especially grizzlies and wolves. Vital Ground has contributed to eight of these voluntary allotment buyouts thus far. Allotment retirements have received strong support from livestock producers and offer a practical solution to livestock/wildlife conflicts on public lands.

In 2008, Vital Ground helped NWF retire 34,500 acres of the Dunoir grazing allotment on the Shoshone National Forest, just east of Grand Teton National Park in northwestern Wyoming. Allotment buyout agreements are entirely voluntary: NWF negotiates a price with the permittee based on the amount of forage given up. Livestock growers then typically use the payment to secure other grazing in areas without wildlife conflicts. In the case of the Dunoir, the agreement retired grazing in a 34,500-acre backcountry section, but will allow continued livestock use in a developed area adjacent to the permittee's private land.

The backcountry portion of the allotment on the East and West Dunoir Rivers is a popular area with hikers, horsepackers, hunters and anglers, and a stronghold for grizzlies. Over the past twenty years, at least 52 individual grizzlies have been radio-tracked using the area. The upper Dunoir lies completely within the Primary Conservation Area for grizzlies, where the bear is supposed to receive primary management consideration.

The Dunoir also supports large herds of mule deer and elk and is home range for the Washakie wolf pack. In addition, it contains yearlong habitat for moose and winter range for bighorn sheep. With livestock rmoved from the landscape, the region will be a haven for wild ungulates and predators.

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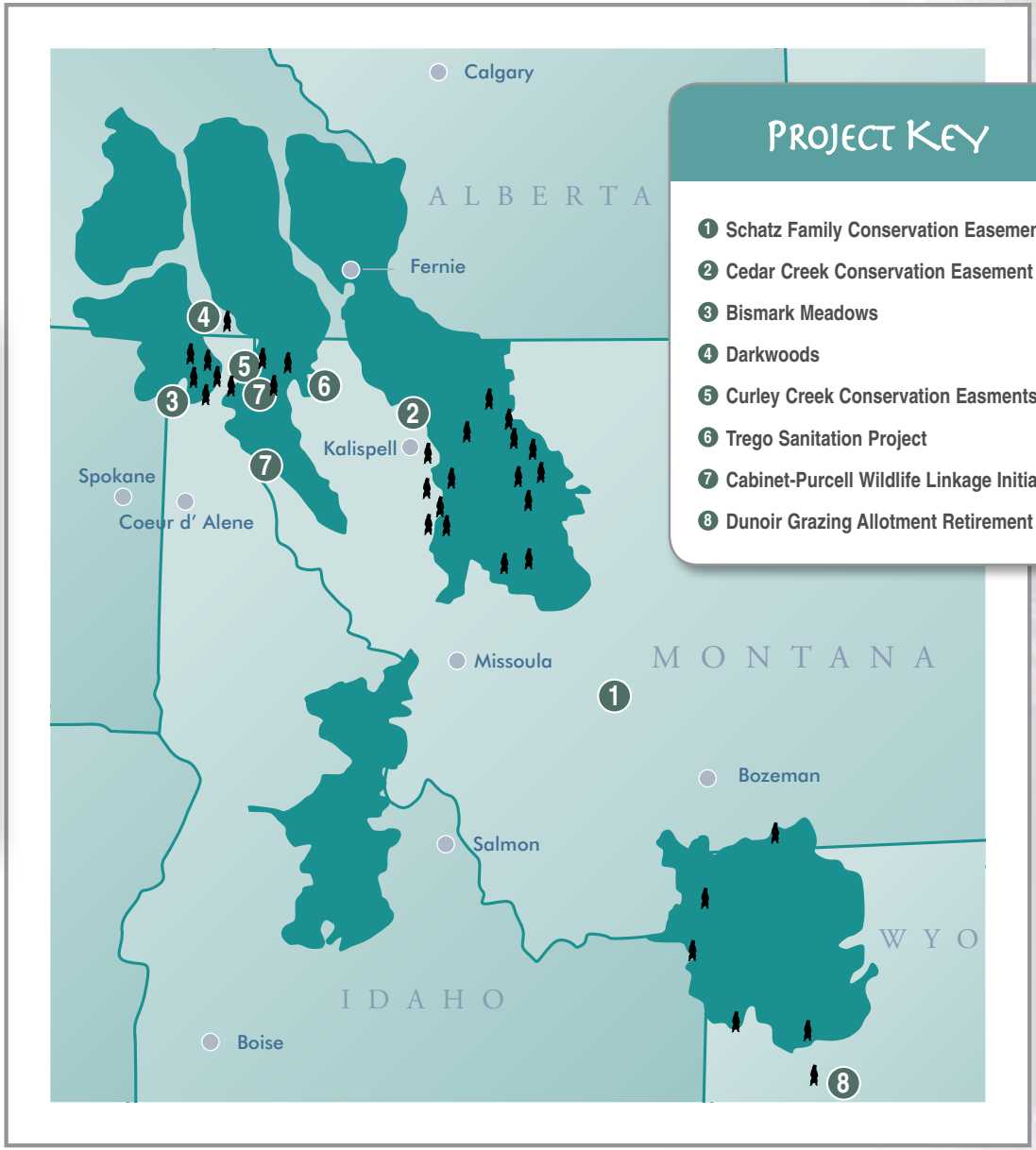
Thank you for your support of the Allotment Buyout Campaign. These areas contain some of the finest wildlife habitat in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, and are the places where the most controversial resource debates have taken place. I value our partnership with Vital Ground.

—Larry Schweiger,CEO, National Wildlife Federation

Bear Tracks

VITAL GROUND PROJECT LOCATIONS

- *Previous Projects*
- *2008–2009 Projects*
- *Grizzly Bear Recovery Ecosystems*



Project Key

1. Schatz Family Conservation Easement
2. Cedar Creek Conservation Easement
3. Bismark Meadows
4. Darkwoods
5. Curley Creek Conservation Easments
6. Trego Sanitation Project
7. Cabinet-Purcell Wildlife Linkage Initiative
8. Dunoir Grazing Allotment Retirement

Photo illustration images by: Jamie Scarrow and Robert Scriba

Strength of Connections Campaign

There seems to be a tacit assumption that if grizzlies survive in Canada and Alaska, that is good enough. It is not good enough for me. Relegating grizzlies to Alaska is about like relegating happiness to heaven; one may never get there.

—Aldo Leopold
A Sand County Almanac

To celebrate our upcoming 20th anniversary year in 2010, in July 2009 Vital Ground launched the most ambitious fundraising campaign in our history. We set a goal of raising $2 million by the end of 2010 to protect crucial habitat links and seasonal habitats for the grizzly populations most at risk in the Rocky Mountains.

In the remote Selkirk, Purcell, and Cabinet mountains of the Idaho Panhandle and northwestern Montana, a handful of grizzlies hang on in dwindling and isolated populations. No more than 100 grizzlies remain in the Selkirk Ecosystem, which stretches from Idaho into southern British Columbia. In Montana's Cabinet–Yaak Ecosystem, only an estimated 35 - 45 bears survive in two isolated sub-populations. Maintaining the links between these populations is vital to the great bear's recovery in the Northern Rockies. The *Strength of Connections Campaign* targets protection of crucial seasonal habitat and movement corridors for these imperiled bears.

The Doris Duke Charitable Foundation awarded Vital Ground a provisional lead grant through the Northwest Wildlife Conservation Initiative specifically for protection of spring grizzly habitat in Bismark Meadows, Idaho. This grant jumpstarted our *Strength of Connections Campaign* with a 5:1 required match to be met by December, 2010.

Vital Ground has already acquired three key parcels in Bismark Meadows. Contributions to the *Strength of Connections Campaign* will help Vital Ground manage these properties in perpetuity and allow us to protect even more acreage at Bismark Meadows. The campaign will also help support our Cabinet–Purcell Wildlife Linkage Initiative in western Montana where we have developed a strategic region-wide lands conservation plan for key movement corridors and habitat links.

The campaign will enable Vital Ground to move forward with land conservation projects in the region through voluntary private land conservation easements and landowner agreements. Piece by piece, these efforts will secure habitat that will give grizzlies safe passage from Canada south into the historic grizzly range of Idaho's Selway–Bitterroot Wilderness.

The Silvertip Legacy Circle

The Silvertip Legacy Circle recognizes those donors who make a lasting commitment to Vital Ground by pledging their support through wills, trusts, charitable gift annuities, or other planned gifts. By doing so, Circle members ensure future income to Vital Ground for projects that will enhance the survival of North America's grizzly populations and biodiversity for generations to come.

Our Silvertip Legacy Circle members are:

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Photo by Thomas D. Mangelsen

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The Vital Ground Foundation gratefully acknowledges the many donors and partners who supported our work to protect and restore North America's grizzly bear populations by conserving wildlife habitat. Unfortunately, limited space prevents us from providing a complete listing of all donors. Listed donors contributed at least $100 during the 2008–2009 biennium. We regret any inadvertent omissions or errors, and ask that you bring these to our attention by calling 406-549-8650.

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Financial Overview 2008–2009

The Vital Ground Foundation's public support and revenues totaled $2,417,903 during the 2008–2009 biennium. Of that amount, $757,000 was attributed to the value of the donated portions of three conservation easements and one property acquisition.

During this period, $1,532,523 (79.5% of all expenditures) was spent on Vital Ground's conservation mission. An additional $157,000 was spent to purchase two conservation properties at Bismark Meadows. The purchase price of these properties was not included in mission "expenditures" because they were retained by the organization and recorded as "conservation land assets" on the Statement of Financial Position (p. 26).

Vital Ground's 79.5% program expense ratio exceeds the Better Business Bureau's Wise Giving Alliance *Standards for Charitable Accountability*, which suggests that charitable organizations should spend at least 65% of total expenses on program activities. The organization's Total Net Assets on December 31, 2009 were $1,508,555 representing a 48% increase from December 31, 2007.

Vital Ground depends upon private contributions to finance our wildlife habitat conservation work. As a charitable nonprofit organization, our success depends upon the generous support of our many individual donors, foundations, and business partners. Donations to Vital Ground qualify as charitable contributions and may be tax-deductible. There are many ways to support our mission. A few of these are:

Individuals
- Cash Contributions
- Gifts of Securities or Real Estate
- Donated Conservation Easements
- Bequests
- Charitable Remainder Trusts
- Charitable Gift Annuities

Businesses
- Business Partnerships
- Sponsorships
- Employer Matching Gifts

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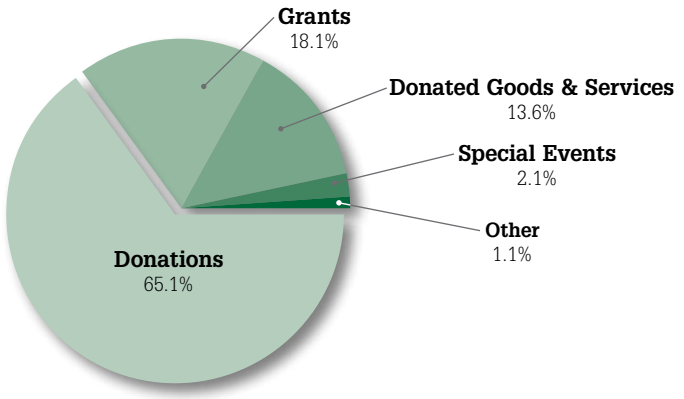
- General Operations and Project Grants
- Matching Gift Support
- Endowment Funding

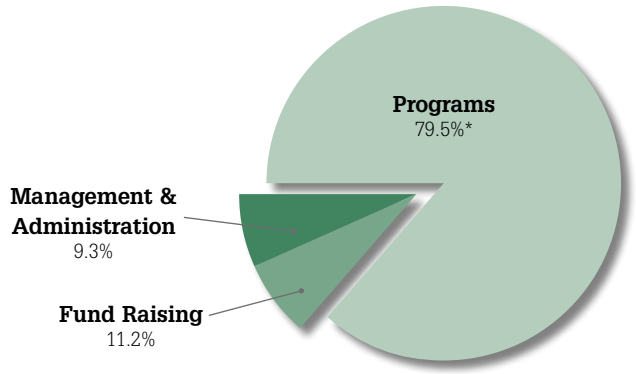
Vital Ground is audited annually. To receive a copy of Vital Ground's most recent audited financial statements or IRS Form 990, please visit our website or contact our office.

Vital Ground is a 501(c)(3) organization.
Our federal tax ID number is 87-0483446.

SOURCE OF FUNDS - $2,417,903



USE OF FUNDS - $1,927,626



**The Better Business Bureau's Wise Giving Alliance Standards for Charity Accountability suggest that a charity should spend at least 65% of its total expenses on program activities.*

Statement of Financial Position *December 31, 2009*

ASSETS	
Cash	418,305
Investments	100,043
Inventories	17,172
Receivables	152,500
Prepaid Expenses	6,379
Property, Plant and Equipment	23,365
Conservation Land	870,401
TOTAL ASSETS	**$1,588,165**
LIABILITIES	
Current	63,999
Long-term Debt	5,611
TOTAL LIABILITIES	**$ 79,610**
NET ASSETS	
Unrestricted	1,201,016
Temporarily Restricted	132,220
Permanently Restricted	175,319
TOTAL NET ASSETS	**$1,508,555**

Photo by Robert Scriba

Vital Ground Board and Staff

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BART THE BEAR™

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AMBASSADORS
BART THE BEAR 2™

HONEY-BUMP THE BEAR™

TANK THE BEAR™

In memory of
Vital Ground's original
Animal Ambassador
BART the BEAR
1977 - 2000

Photo by Galen Rowell

The Vital Ground Foundation's mission is to protect and restore North America's grizzly bear populations by conserving wildlife habitat for future generations. In support of this mission, we:

- *Protect lands that grizzlies need to survive, not only for bears but for all other species that share their world;*
- *Work where human impacts encroach on some of the wildest places left on the continent;*
- *Target projects that sustain habitat connections, conserve critical lands, and reduce conflicts between bears and people;*
- *Ground our projects on current science and strong partnerships.*

Please join us! As a 501(c)(3) charitable nonprofit, our success depends on you!

VITAL GROUND

T-2 Fort Missoula
Missoula, MT 59804
Telephone: (406) 549-8650
Email: info@vitalground.org
Website: www.vitalground.org
Fax: (406) 549-8787

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CONNECTING LANDSCAPES,
CONNECTING WILDLIFE,
CONNECTING PEOPLE™

Photo by Thomas D. Mangelsen