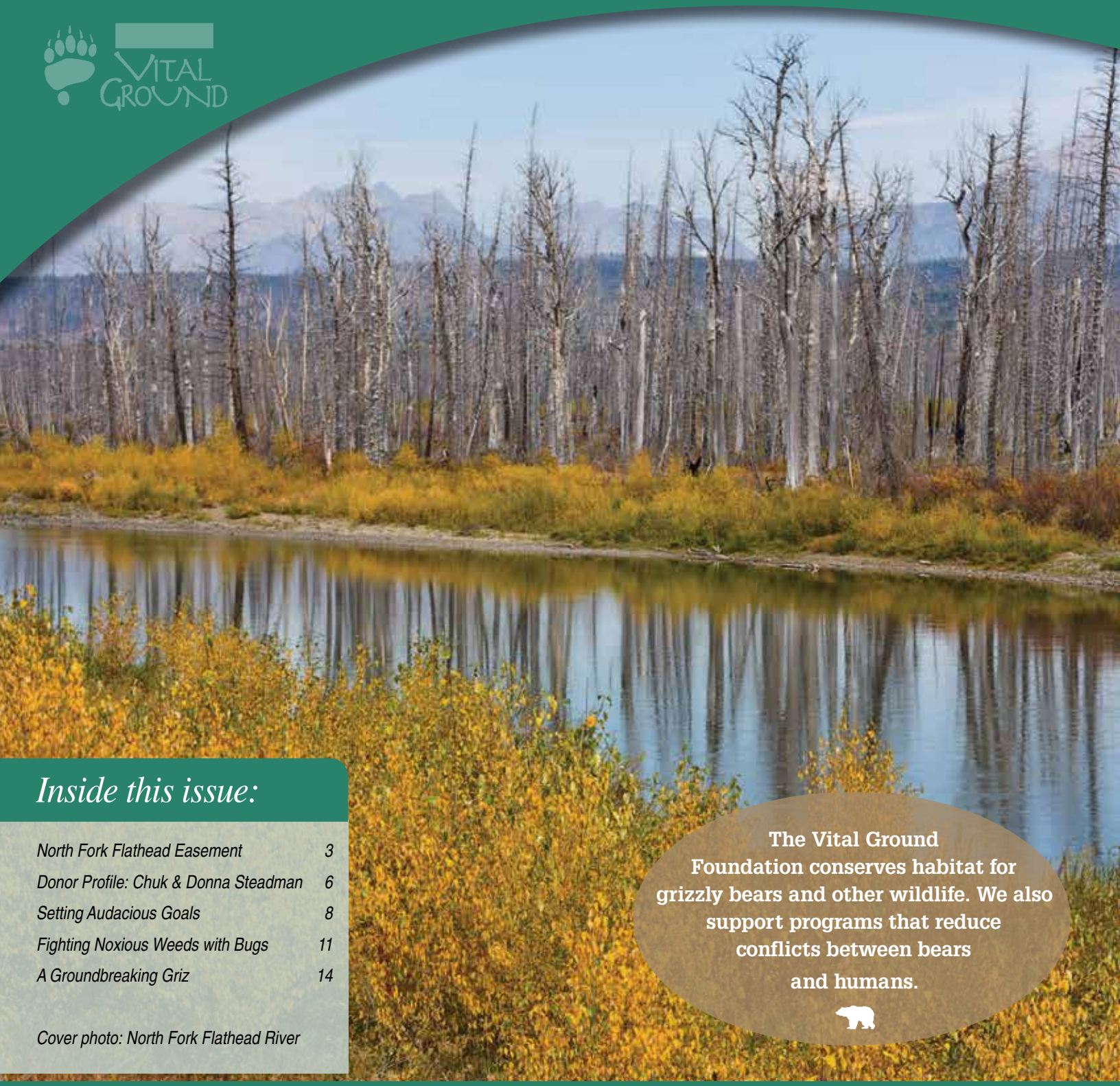
# Vital News



## *Inside this issue:*


| | |
|---|---|
| *North Fork Flathead Easement* | *3* |
| *Donor Profile: Chuk & Donna Steadman* | *6* |
| *Setting Audacious Goals* | *8* |
| *Fighting Noxious Weeds with Bugs* | *11* |
| *A Groundbreaking Griz* | *14* |


*Cover photo: North Fork Flathead River*

**The Vital Ground Foundation conserves habitat for grizzly bears and other wildlife. We also support programs that reduce conflicts between bears and humans.**

PROTECTING HABITAT, CONNECTING LANDSCAPES, CONSERVING WILDLIFE

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# Executive Director's Corner

Implicit in Vital Ground's work is the fact that grizzly bears live in a dynamic world. The landscapes they inhabit are under constant pressures. Habitat loss and fragmentation stemming from human encroachment regularly displace bears and bring them into conflict with people. Climate change continues to alter their ecosystems, with shifting temperatures and food availability forcing bears to modify their behavior to meet their habitat needs. These changes compound to challenge individual bears as well as the overall vitality of the species. The consequences for those individual bears that cannot adapt to meet these challenges are serious—life or death serious.

And so it goes with nonprofit organizations. Any successful corporation, nonprofit or other, must constantly look to the future to anticipate the challenges and opportunities headed its way, then figure out how to marshal its resources to most effectively accomplish its mission. At best, a reluctance to set far-reaching goals and adapt to meet challenges would result in an organization becoming irrelevant. Although it's easy to think that an organization's dissolution would be the worst case scenario, missed opportunities and wasted resources—resources that could be used to affect positive change elsewhere—might be worse than outright failure. So how can Vital Ground adapt to meet the challenges and opportunities facing grizzly bears in their march toward recovery in North America?

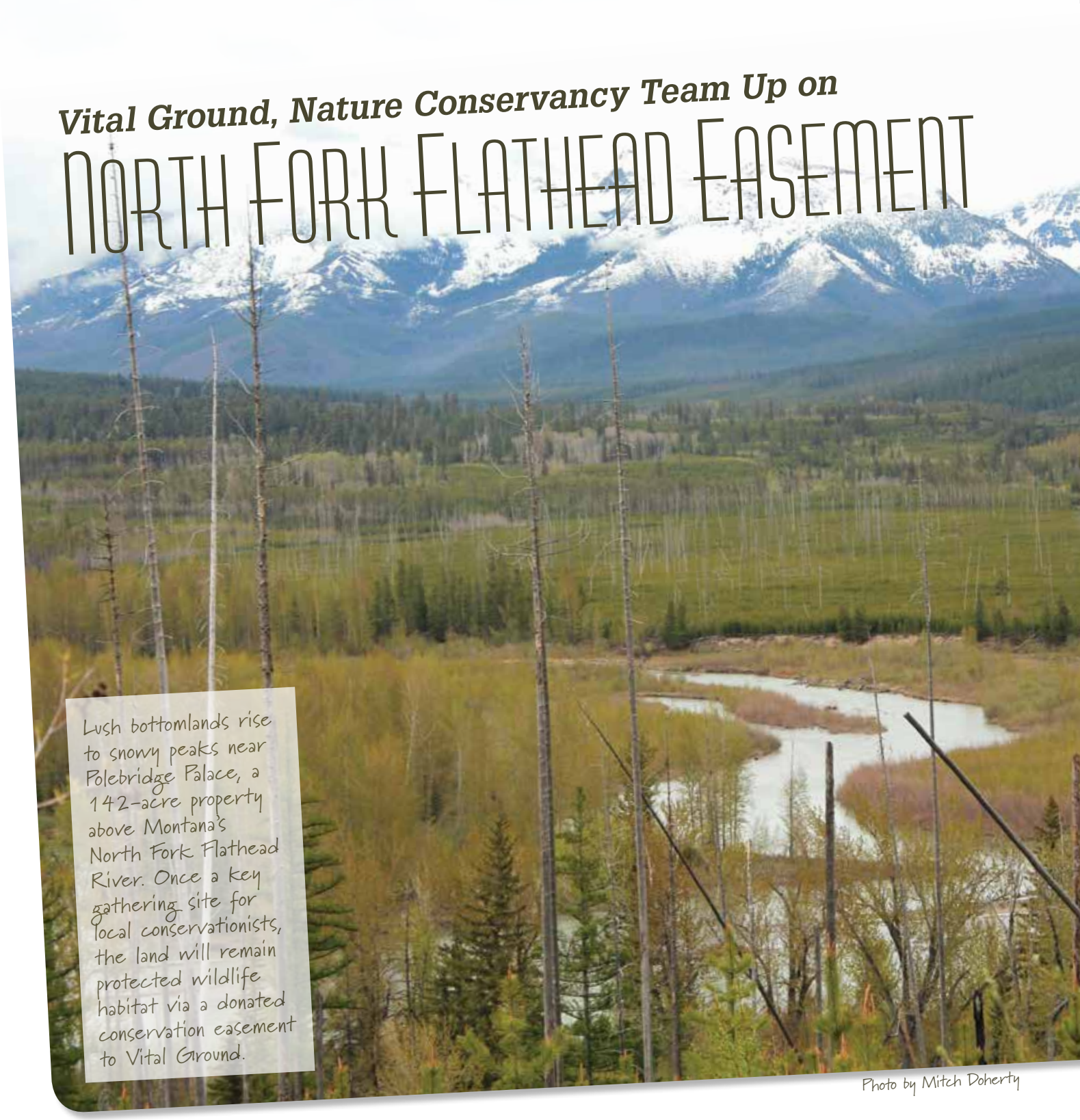
With that question in mind earlier this year, we embarked on a bold strategic planning process to guide our conservation programs into the next decade. Seeking out the collective experience of professional grizzly bear managers and biologists throughout the region, we've asked the experts to: (1) help us inventory and prioritize the habitat conservation opportunities that will most contribute to the long term recovery of grizzlies, and; (2) help inventory and prioritize high-conflict areas where the investment of limited resources will stretch the furthest to increase the landscape's social carrying capacity for grizzlies.

These management professionals responded with enthusiasm and generous contributions of their time and guidance—and I think that many found unexpected reciprocal value in the opportunity to share and receive information across jurisdictional divides that sometimes artificially silo important developments. With sincere gratitude to the more than 50 dedicated wildlife managers who offered advice, Vital Ground is excited to bring you a special preview of this effort on pages 8-10 of this *Vital News* issue.

As this process is finalized, Vital Ground will reach out for your help to put the plan into action. We hope that you will answer that call to ensure the future of the great bears and every creature that shares their wild space!

## *Vital Ground, Nature Conservancy Team Up on*

# North Fork Flathead Easement



Lush bottomlands rise to snowy peaks near Polebridge Palace, a 142-acre property above Montana's North Fork Flathead River. Once a key gathering site for local conservationists, the land will remain protected wildlife habitat via a donated conservation easement to Vital Ground.

Photo by Mitch Doherty

*By Matt Hart*

A property that helped turn Montana's North Fork Flathead River into a conservation stronghold is changing hands but remaining wild, as The Vital Ground Foundation has teamed up with The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and new landowners on a conservation easement protecting 142 acres of forestland and wildlife habitat known as Polebridge Palace.

On the pine-strewn benches above the North Fork Flathead, the area will remain a haven for grizzly bears, Canada lynx and other sensitive wildlife, as well as a part of the protected Glacier National Park viewshed that annually attracts millions of domestic and international tourists. Meanwhile, TNC can ensure permanent protection for a place that once hosted the group's early momentum-building events in the valley.

(*continued on page 4*)

(*North Fork from page 3*)

"We're very excited," said Greg Lambert, transactions manager for TNC's Montana chapter. "We decided a few years ago that the best option for TNC was not to own it, but as a conservation organization, we wanted the property protected in perpetuity and would never have sold it without an easement in place."

The agreement includes TNC selling the acreage to new private buyers while donating a conservation easement to Vital Ground. The easement stipulates that the new landowners will not develop the forested property beyond its current house and small outbuildings, keeping the bulk of the property preserved as habitat that will help reduce bear-human conflicts in the area.

"Vital Ground and The Nature Conservancy have a solid history of collaborating on projects that benefit bears, people and an array of other species," said Ryan Lutey, executive director of Vital Ground. "The grizzly's status as an umbrella species makes our organizations' missions highly complementary."

For TNC, the transaction furthers a model the conservancy has used before: buying and stewarding strategically targeted land, then eventually selling to private buyers with an accompanying conservation easement through a local land trust. In the case of Polebridge Palace, the place became more than just a house and forest, frequently hosting local gatherings and special guests during the late 1990s and early 2000s, when TNC helped spur a strong conservation mindset in the valley. It was also a recognized hotspot for grizzlies, one of the reasons that TNC first purchased and aggregated the four private parcels that now comprise Polebridge Palace. The grizzly factor was also what drew TNC to Vital Ground.

"We were looking for a partner that is active in the area and has a good reputation," said Lambert. "We knew Vital Ground would be the right fit for the property."

The North Fork—as many know the valley—is already a sanctuary for wildlife. Biologists have documented grizzly bear activity on and around Polebridge Palace, where shady soils offer bears fall berries and spring root forage—important early- and late-season foods not available on the snowy slopes of the Whitefish Range that rise west of the property. Meanwhile, Canada lynx—which the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service currently lists as a threatened species—also find a foothold in the valley, with deep snows and diverse forest creating ideal conditions for denning and hunting the cats' favorite meal, snowshoe hare.

Along with many other sensitive wildlife species, threatened Canada lynx find foothold in the North Fork Valley, where deep snows provide ideal denning and hunting conditions.

Conserving Polebridge Palace will do more than strengthen existing habitat for a roster of species that includes wolverine, wolves, moose and elk. The Whitefish Range stands as an important buffer in genetically linking the grizzlies of the Glacier area with bears farther west in the struggling Cabinet-Yaak subpopulation. With Polebridge Palace bordered by public land on two sides, and much of the nearby private land also under easements, bears and other wildlife that range west from Glacier will have a bit more security early in their journey.

"It was originally platted as four separate tracts and now it will be prohibited from subdivision," explained Lambert. "You could have seen four houses up there instead of one, so that's the biggest win, especially for grizzlies."

Photo by Y2Y/Gem Vision Productions

*Wild River Update*

# Crucial Habitat Linkage Secured

*Protecting the Wild River property will prevent intensive development of a currently intact wildlife habitat linkage within the Cabinet-Yaak Grizzly Bear Recovery Zone and contribute to the regional recovery of grizzlies between the Yellowstone Ecosystem and Canada.*

Often, the key to conservation is collaboration. Tucked away in northwest Montana outside the 1,000-person town of Troy, Wild River Estates appears to be just another potential housing development. But science reveals its hidden secret: a key linkage that holds an opportunity to help grizzlies and advance conservation in the region.

On October 3rd, Vital Ground and Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y) announced the first successful Wild River land acquisition.

This milestone builds on a decade of collaboration between the two organizations to protect habitat for grizzlies and other wide-ranging wildlife throughout the Cabinet-Purcell mountain region of Montana, Idaho and British Columbia. With this land purchase, a pinch point for wildlife stands to become a bridge, linking grizzlies from two mountain ranges and helping an embattled population of bears recover and thrive.

Combined efforts from the two organizations have secured seven lots from the 42-acre river-front subdivision. This land, situated in the heart of a crucial connection bridging the Kootenai Valley floor, is a key linkage from the Yaak Valley to the Cabinet Mountains, in an area long prioritized for protection by wildlife biologists from multiple agencies and nonprofit entities.

"From a continental perspective, this parcel of land is of particular importance on the Yellowstone to Yukon scale," says Harvey Locke, co-founder of Y2Y. "This area is critical to restoring linkages between key populations of grizzlies, especially between Canada and Yellowstone National Park."

In addition to providing sanctuary for the 50 or so grizzlies in the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem, the Wild River project secures, and will eventually restore, one-quarter-mile of riverbank and adjacent wetlands along the Kootenai River. The result will be improved habitat for federally endangered white sturgeon and threatened bull trout.

More than 30 other species of concern, including Canada lynx, wolverine and fisher have been observed within a few miles of this land, which Vital Ground will hold in fee title.

"Vital Ground negotiated a complex land transaction with multiple landowners with creativity, patience and professionalism that resulted in the best possible outcome," says Kim Trotter, U.S. program director for Y2Y.

The two organizations previously acquired Yaak Mountain, an adjacent 71-acre property to Wild River, further protecting this priority linkage area.

"With the closing of this deal, Vital Ground and Y2Y are off and running toward Phase II of the project that aims to secure five additional lots by the end of 2018," says Ryan Lutey, executive director of Vital Ground.

Thank you for your support in achieving this important win for wildlife—and stay tuned for updates on this project in early 2018.

*—The Vital Ground Foundation and Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative*

Chuk and Donna Steadman

# Memorializing a Lifetime of Conservation at Wild River

*By Kim Davitt*

Protecting land is one of the most tangible and forward-thinking actions you can take to honor a lifetime dedicated to conservation. For Donna Steadman, it is how she is honoring the life of her late husband, Charles "Chuk" Steadman. Donna recently made a $200,000 memorial contribution toward the first phase of Vital Ground's Wild River project, a strategic effort to protect habitat for grizzly bears and other sensitive species in an important wildlife corridor in northwest Montana. The memorial gift celebrates Chuk's long-stated goal of "making a difference for animals and for the planet."

Like many who are attracted to wild places and wildlife, Chuk headed west from his boyhood home in Cleveland. After exploring the Sierra Nevada Mountains while serving in the military, he and Donna moved to the Southwest in the mid-1970s where he began constructing an innovative home—a geodesic dome with hand-made solar collectors—in the foothills of Tucson. The Steadmans' explorations of the West took them to eastern Arizona, the High Sierras of Nevada, and finally the verdant valleys of Oregon. Their homes have reflected their values of sustainability and conservation and included windmills, grey water systems and solar features.

Conservation also informed their work. In addition to owning an athletic club, Chuk grew alfalfa, while Donna joined the board of the local Humane Society and became increasingly involved in animal advocacy. As Chuk and Donna began devoting more time to environmental and animal welfare causes, they opened one of the nation's only retail stores selling exclusively environmentally-safe and cruelty-free products. "Being activists for these two causes became a big part of our lives," Donna said. "We were often seen at the state legislature lobbying either for or against various bills and served on a number of community committees that addressed animal issues."

In the early 1990s, a volunteer trip to a chimpanzee rescue center in the central African nation of Burundi taught the Steadmans the importance of preserving sustainable habitat for important ecological umbrella species. This lesson stayed with them over the years and eventually led to a shared dream of establishing an animal preserve—a sizable, intact piece of land in a pristine area where native animals would be safe to roam.

Unfortunately, Chuk's health failed and they were not able to enact their plan together. After his passing last October, Donna looked for an organization whose mission and goals closely matched their vision. A friend living in Montana suggested Vital Ground. After reading every word on our website, Donna knew that we would be the right partner to help her memorialize Chuk's commitment to conservation and their shared vision for protected land.

Donna emphasized her appreciation for Vital Ground's commitment to conserving "land where apex predators can thrive while many other species of animals and plants enjoy shelter under this protective umbrella." She knew that a significant contribution to the Wild River project would be a fitting tribute to her husband's memory, one that Chuk surely would have embraced.

### *Memorial Gifts*

If you would like to remember someone's conservation legacy by contributing a memorial to permanently protect grizzly bear and wildlife habitat, please contact Kim Davitt at Vital Ground—406.549.8650 or kdavitt@vitalground.org

## Matt Hart Joins Vital Ground as Staff Conservation Writer

If you've been reading *Vital News* over the last year, you've probably seen Matt Hart's name atop project updates and news releases. You may have even seen him in person, scribbling notes at the back of a Vital Ground event or running and skiing the trails around Missoula. After a successful stint as a communications intern, we're now excited to have Matt join the Vital Ground team as a full-fledged staff member.

Matt moved to Missoula for graduate school, completing a master's degree in Environmental Studies at the University of Montana in May 2017. He first found Vital Ground as a member of the Wyss Foundation's Conservation Scholars Program, an educational initiative that supports graduate students pursuing careers as conservation leaders in the American West. Now, as Vital Ground's staff conservation writer, he will continue to write for *Vital News* and the website while pursuing opportunities to tell Vital Ground's story to new audiences. He'll also contribute to our development efforts, writing grant proposals and helping cultivate relationships with foundations and individuals who make Vital Ground's work possible.

Matt grew up in western Massachusetts, exploring the woods and lakes of New England and Upstate New York. He started his westward migration by attending Carleton College in Minnesota, where he graduated with a bachelor of arts degree in English in 2011. But it was the Rockies and not the Land of 10,000 Lakes that hooked him, as he spent his college summers and several seasons after working as a backcountry ranger and outdoor educator at Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico.

Matt Hart

## Vital Ground Intern Adrienne Ingram Honored

Adrienne Ingram

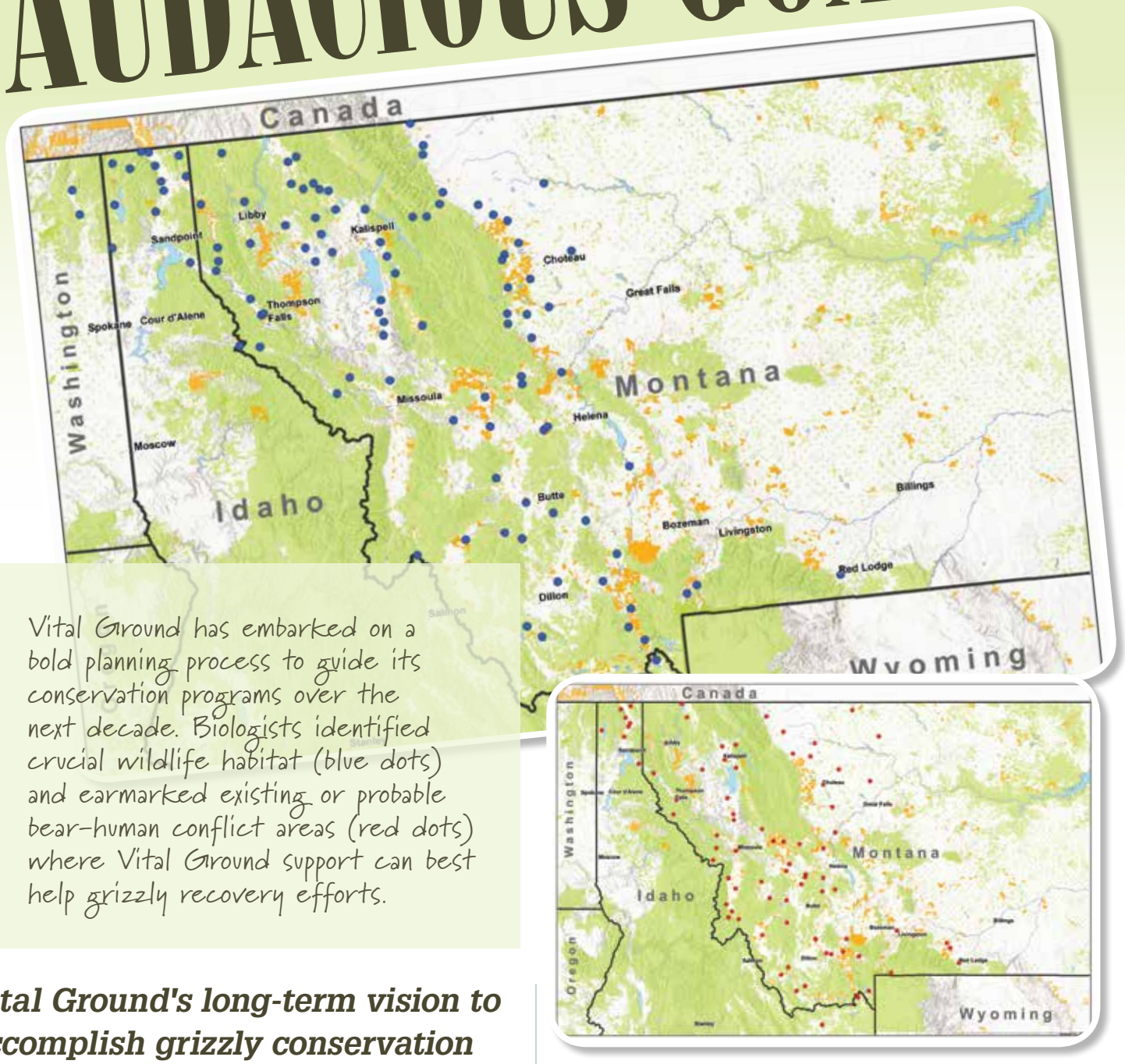
Vital Ground social media intern Adrienne Ingram received the Loyola University New Orleans Center for Environmental Communication's Outstanding Student of the Year Award for her initiative in landing a position and honing her craft at Vital Ground. She was also recognized for her eagerness to work on Loyola's special projects and opportunities.

"I was particularly honored to receive this award, not only because I devote my heart and soul to my work at Loyola and Vital Ground, but also because I look up to Dr. Bob (Dr. Bob Thomas) to such a great degree—as a professor, mentor, and confidant" Ingram said. "He really invested in my academic and personal potential in a way that has so positively shaped my undergraduate experience."

While simultaneously working on her undergraduate degree, for two years Ingram has created weekly social media outlines, produced content, made posts, facilitated campaigns and monitored results for Vital Ground.

For Loyola University New Orleans, she has updated and managed taxonomy banks, updated the Center for Environmental Communication website, edited video, worked on graphic design and more.

# SETTING AUDACIOUS GOALS




Vital Ground has embarked on a bold planning process to guide its conservation programs over the next decade. Biologists identified crucial wildlife habitat (blue dots) and earmarked existing or probable bear-human conflict areas (red dots) where Vital Ground support can best help grizzly recovery efforts.

## *Vital Ground's long-term vision to accomplish grizzly conservation*

*By Vital Ground Staff*

As grizzly bears emerged from their dens throughout the Rocky Mountains last April, Vital Ground convened the first of several strategic planning sessions aimed at creating a comprehensive framework from which to launch its private-land conservation projects over the next decade. Pulling together Vital Ground trustees and advisors with dozens of federal, state and tribal grizzly bear researchers and managers, the organization used these meetings to solicit local, regional and national input to plot a course for grizzly bear habitat conservation and sustainability in the northwestern United States.

Vital Ground advisor Colleen Matt helped facilitate the first gathering, held in Missoula, with assistance from Vital Ground staff, including Conservation Manager Gael Bissell. The sessions were Bissell's brainchild, drawn

from experience and connections honed during her three-decade career in wildlife biology with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

The purpose of the first meeting, according to Bissell, was to confirm the collaborative's approach and gather detailed information on both private-land conservation needs and bear/human conflict prevention opportunities from the region-wide cross section of grizzly bear managers and researchers.

"We also emphasized consolidating information in a useable, meaningful way," said Bissell. "We wanted to make sure that we had a plan for continued outreach through subsequent localized meetings that would take place throughout the year."

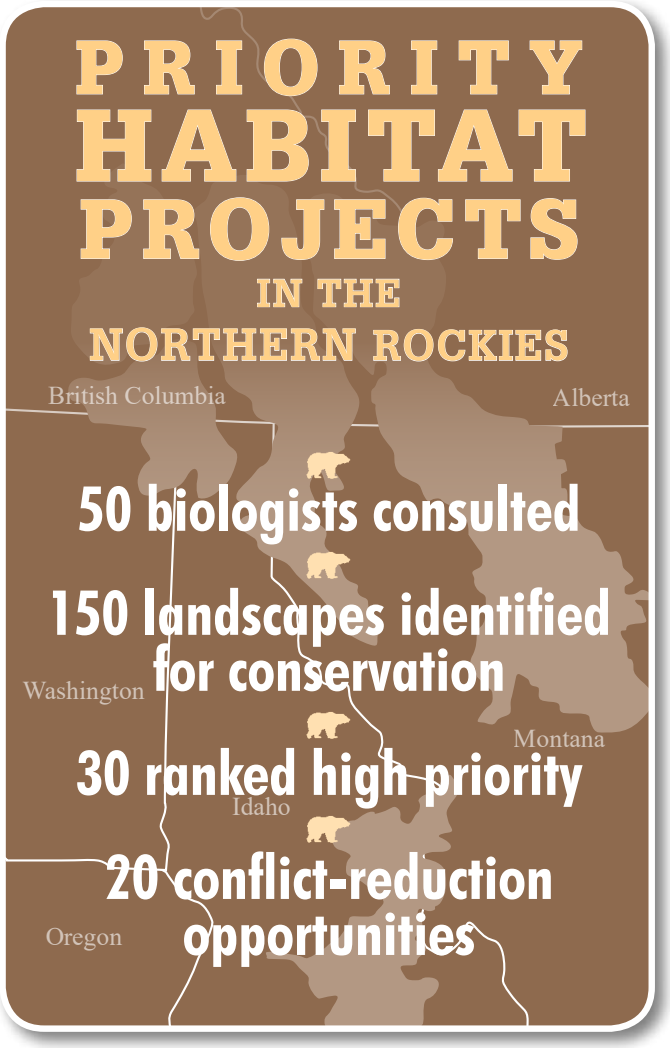
With a dozen high-level wildlife managers present at the kickoff meeting in Missoula, Vital Ground Executive Director Ryan Lutey recognized more than 300 years of collective grizzly bear management experience in the room, and encouraged attendees to think about collaborative opportunities extending well beyond the day's exercises.

> *"You need to concurrently focus on reducing conflicts between bears and people —there is no point in conserving a lot of habitat if grizzlies can't access it."*
>
> *—Greg Johnson, former Idaho Fish and Game Conservation Officer*

"Applying this much cumulative experience through engagement with a nonprofit is an excellent way to advance discussions and goals outside of strict regulatory models," said Lutey. "We're hoping this meeting gives everyone a chance to air ideas that seem too far reaching within their everyday sideboards. Just think about the potential if even a couple of those ideas gain momentum."

With its first meeting in the books, Vital Ground spent the remainder of the summer and fall meeting with another 40 wildlife and grizzly bear researchers, biologists and managers across Idaho, Wyoming, Montana and Canada. In those subsequent meetings, experts used detailed regional maps to pinpoint critical, unprotected private-land habitat, guiding Vital Ground staff to inventory and prioritize more than 150 landscapes important to grizzlies and other wildlife, and helped pinpoint 80 specific conflict reduction opportunities in north Idaho and Montana.

Preliminary interpretation reveals approximately 30 areas ranked as crucial for protection. These priority locations range from linkage corridors between the Greater Yellowstone and the Northern Continental Divide ecosystems to smaller private properties surrounded by public lands that are threatened by recreational development.




The second phase of each meeting focused on identifying and analyzing bear/human conflict-reduction needs and opportunities across the region.

"You need to concurrently focus on reducing conflicts between bears and people," said Greg Johnson, a meeting participant and former Idaho Fish and Game Conservation Officer. "There is no point in conserving a lot of habitat if grizzlies can't access it."

Opportunities stemming from this analysis range from investing in bear education programs to inventorying attractants such as garbage collection and waste-disposal sites, uncontained grain, and certain agricultural activities that could benefit from electric fencing or other modifications. Of the 80 opportunities identified, 20 floated to the top as needing immediate attention.

"Reducing conflicts with bears reduces management, which reduces bear mortalities," said Kevin Frey, another meeting participant who serves as a Wildlife Management Specialist for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. "That helps a state meet its grizzly mortality limits

and contributes to the eventual delisting of the species."

Participating in the initial meeting, Vital Ground Board Chairman Stuart Strahl emphasized that this undertaking is just the first step in a long-term plan to both guide the organization's future investments and ensure its sustainability.

"Strategic planning really should be a continually ongoing and organic process," Strahl said. "Constantly evaluating and challenging the way things are done keeps an organization vibrant and its supporters engaged. Those incremental course corrections accumulate, and before you know it, you've arrived at a seemingly insurmountable goal."

*"Reducing conflicts with bears reduces management, which reduces bear mortalities —that helps a state meet its grizzly mortality limits and contributes to the eventual delisting of the species."*

*—Kevin Frey, Wildlife Management Specialist Region 3, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks*

Preliminary reviews of the data indicate that the conservation priorities are far more demanding than any organization or agency can singlehandedly address. Consequently, Vital Ground intends the final products from this effort to not only anchor the organization's future work, but also inform grizzly bear conservation efforts by agencies, tribes, other partner organizations and private landowners.

Over the next few months, Vital Ground's staff, trustees and advisors will continue to analyze the collected information, generating manageable summaries and

Photo by Danielle Oyler

With the aid of regional maps, biologists pinpointed unprotected wildlife habitat, allowing Vital Ground to inventory and prioritize more than 150 landscapes crucial for grizzlies and other wildlife.

preliminary private land/conflict reduction goals and objectives. The organization will then share and adjust these early results with the participating experts and advisors and finally distribute the preliminary priorities to other land trusts and partner organizations. Vital Ground's board, advisors, and staff will use the final results to develop a strategic conservation plan to guide the organization's overall habitat conservation program over the next decade—but only with the help of wildlife enthusiasts who will step forward to protect and connect grizzlies and the many species that share their range.

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

# Vital Ground Fights Noxious Weeds with Bugs

*By Mitch Doherty*

The Alvord Lake Community Forest is a long way from the warm, exotic climate found in the Mediterranean, but the 1,500 migrant knapweed root-boring weevils native to another continent should find the new setting delightful and the forage abundant.

In 2017, through a grant funded by the Montana Department of Natural Resources (DNRC) and the U.S. Forest Service, the dark gray-and-white speckled bio-control agents known as knapweed root-boring weevils were released at Vital Ground's Alvord Lake Community Forest near Troy, Montana.

Like many areas throughout the northern Rockies, the Alvord Lake Community Forest, which was once managed as corporate timber grounds, suffers from invasion of the non-native plant spotted knapweed. The comprehensive Alvord Lake Community Forest Management Plan, drafted by local volunteers and a host of partners, calls for an integrated approach to weed management on the forest that includes the use of both herbicide and bio-controls such as root-boring weevil.

Photo by Mitch Doherty

As one of our forest-stewardship activities, Vital Ground uses root-boring weevils to fight noxious weeds.

In the coming years, these industrious bugs will help reduce purple-flowered noxious weeds by laying up to 100 eggs each in deposits on the root crown of the plant. Once the larva emerges, it feasts on the plant's root tissue, subsequently stunting the flow of nutrients and destroying the plant after one year.

Adult weevils will feed on green tender leaves, but the most damage is caused by larva. These hardy bugs are able to winter in climates found in the northern Rockies and will emerge in the spring to resume gnawing roots, thus making them a long-term solution to manage knapweed on the forest.

This year, Vital Ground submitted an application to DNRC for additional funding to continue weed-control activities such as root-boring weevil. The request also included myriad other proposed forest-stewardship activities all aimed at supporting the long-term recovery of this former piece of corporate timberland to promote a healthy forest, improve wildlife habitat, and to enhance the experience of outdoor enthusiasts who recreate at Alvord Lake.

# A Note from Doug and Lynne Seus

Memories of our beloved Bart will never fade, even though it has been 17 years since we lost our brother. At this time of year, though, our thoughts turn to the great work being done by Vital Ground and our memories of Bart become even more vivid. What better icon could we find to call attention to the fact that grizzly bears need our help than a 12-foot-tall, 1,600-pound giant Griz? To turn that knowledge into reality, Vital Ground was founded to help protect and restore North America's grizzly bear populations by conserving wildlife habitat. Please help conserve land for grizzly bears and other wildlife by donating to the Bart the Bear Memorial Campaign.

– Doug and Lynne Seus

Photo by Keith Highley

# Your Used Vehicle Can Help Carry Vital Ground Forward

Wondering what to do with your used vehicle?

Donating your car, truck, boat, motorcycle or RV to The Vital Ground Foundation is simple and convenient and may qualify you for a tax deduction. And best of all, your vehicle donation will help Vital Ground's efforts to conserve wildlife habitat!

To donate your vehicle, contact Vehicles For Charity, our partner on this program, and they will take care of the rest. Vehicles For Charity will pick up your vehicle, arrange to have your donation towed, and provide you with a tax-deductible receipt—all at no charge.

## Frequently Asked Questions

**What can I donate?**

You can donate most any vehicle, including cars, trucks, boats, motorcycles and recreational vehicles. The vehicle does not have to run. Your donation will be sold at an auction or as salvage, depending on the condition.

**Is my donation tax-deductible?**

Vital Ground is a non-profit organization and all donations may qualify as a charitable deduction. However, we recommended consulting your tax consultant first.

**What do I need to donate my car?**

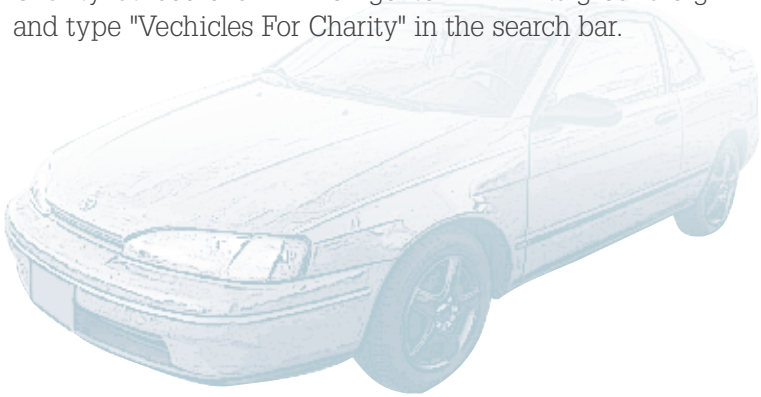
The title to the car must be in your name. Vehicles For Charity will also need information about where the car is located and its condition.

**Will you pick up my car?**

A towing company will call to schedule pick-up. You will need to give the driver the keys to the vehicle as well as your signed title.

**How is the value of my car determined?**

Vehicles For Charity can answer most questions about the program. Questions? Please phone Vehicles For Charity at 866-628-2277 or go to www.vitalground.org and type "Vechicles For Charity" in the search bar.



# LITTLE BART PAWS WAFFLES

***Kodiak Cakes helping to conserve grizzly bear habitat***

*By Matt Hart*

Bart the Bear is at it again. Well, Little Bart, to be specific, the successor to Bart I's role as Vital Ground's Chief Ambassador-in-Fur.

After a *Game of Thrones* appearance and more than a few movies, Little Bart is now taking his talents to the breakfast table. Under the careful guidance of his trainers, Vital Ground co-founders Doug and Lynne Seus, the 1,100-pound Kodiak grizzly recently appeared in a film commercial for the appropriately named Kodiak Cakes, a producer of hearty whole-grain breakfast staples like pancake mix, oatmeal, and now, toaster waffles.

Bart must have caught wind of the new waffle recipe, as the ad depicts him on a film set, tearing down a curtain to reveal a walk-in freezer that presumably holds many breakfasts' worth of Kodiak Cakes' new product. "They're not frozen, they're hibernating," the slogan reads as a member of the film crew is shown munching on a syrupy plate of waffles amid Bart's jealous groans.

While this is Bart's debut with Kodiak Cakes, it's not the company's first experience with grizzlies. That's because the brand has become a key supporter of Vital Ground's work to conserve grizzly habitat in the Northern Rockies and prevent conflicts between bears and humans.

"Kodiak Cakes has a tradition of protecting nature, so joining forces with the Seuses and supporting Vital Ground has been a natural fit," says Allison Brown, public relations manager for Kodiak Cakes. "Through our partnership with Vital Ground, and with Bart's help, Kodiak Cakes is working to support efforts to increase the awareness and effectiveness of conservation efforts wherever grizzly bears may roam."

Selling a single pancake and waffle mix, Kodiak Cakes launched in Park City, Utah, in 1995. The family-owned company reaches back two generations for its origin story, to a grandfather's recipe for hearty whole-wheat flapjacks. First selling their add-water-only mix to gift shops in the ski towns of Park City, Sun Valley and Jackson, the brand has grown steadily and now distributes nationwide, producing nine variations of the original pancake and waffle mix, along with granola, oatmeal and other baking mixes.

But the toaster waffle line will be Kodiak Cakes' first foray into the frozen—or rather, hibernating—foods section of the supermarket. Shoppers can feel great about their purchase, knowing that not only is the whole-grain product a healthy choice for the human body, but also a healthy choice for the entire Northern Rockies bioregion. That's because Kodiak Cakes doesn't just put a bear on their logo, but through support of Vital Ground, they help keep bears free and safe from human conflict in the wild landscapes they call home.

# A Groundbreaking Griz

Photo by Tom Mangelsen

***The travels of a young bear show the challenge of connecting landscapes and the importance of private-land conservation***

*By Matt Hart*

Wildlife connectivity has a new mascot. His name is Grizzly 839.

The bear's fame began last spring when a homeowner outside Whitefish, Mont., spotted a chocolate-furred grizzly investigating his storage shed. The bear left the property unrewarded, but he lingered long enough for the landowner to notice a key detail: the grizzly wore a white collar and ear tags, indicators that researchers had captured him for study in the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem, some 50 miles to the west.

Thanks to some prematurely rotting canvas in his collar, Grizzly 839 soon slipped free of the tracking device, but not out of the conservation spotlight. The unlikely journey that his collar documented now offers the latest case for connecting grizzly habitat across the Northern Rockies region and further proof that private-land conservation has a vital role to play.

## *A Perilous Crossing*

"There's not a lot of grizzly bears in that country," says Alan Wood, a biologist for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. He's referring to the Salish Mountains, the dry, wide range that separates the Glacier National Park-Bob Marshall area from the Cabinet Mountains of Montana's northwest corner. The Salish Range also separates two very disparate grizzly populations: the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem's (NCDE), which boasts more than 1,000 bears roaming across 9,600 square miles, and the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem's, an isolated and embattled population of just 50 or so bears.

Food is scarcer in the Salish Mountains than in the taller, wetter neighboring ranges, and much of the area is privately owned, posing greater risk of human conflict to a wandering bear. The obvious result is few grizzlies crossing between the NCDE and the Cabinets.

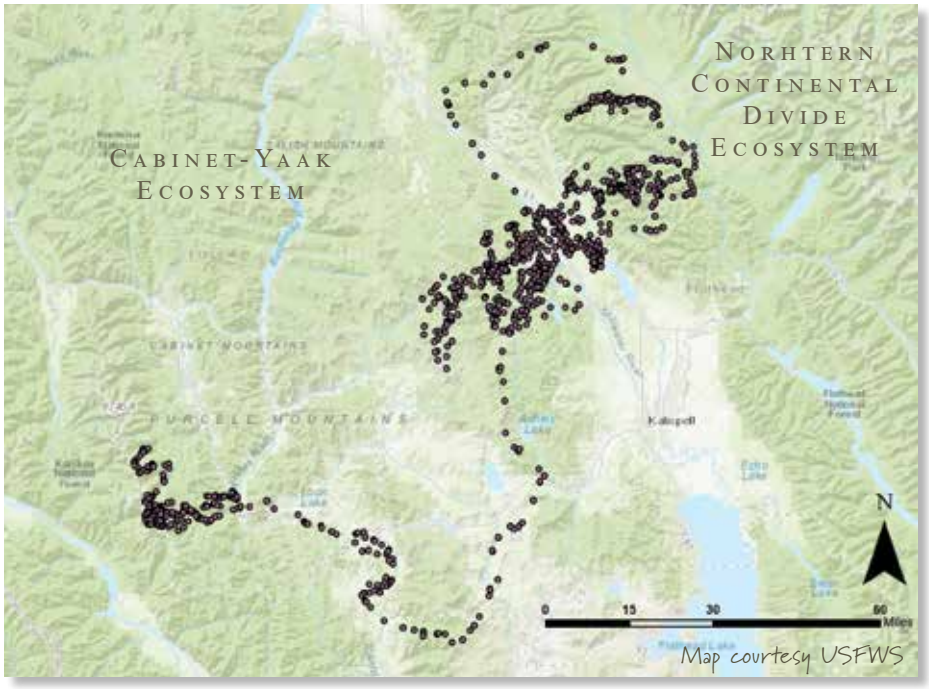
So when 839's collar revealed just such a journey, it came as a surprise. There was just one problem: the four-year old bear had gone the wrong way.

"Having bears go from the Cabinet-Yaak to the NCDE is fine, but we really need it the other way around," explains Wayne Kasworm, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service bear biologist who has led the Cabinet-Yaak grizzly recovery program for the past three decades.

While 839 became a small fish in a large pond by joining the NCDE, an NCDE bear that crossed to the Cabi-

nets—and then reproduced—would bring critical genetic diversity to a small, disconnected population. Only once has Kasworm observed something near the reverse of 839's crossing. Two years ago, a bear tagged in the NCDE ventured west to the southern edge of the Cabinets, near the town of Plains. But before he had time to settle into a new home, the grizzly met an all-too-common fate: a hunter shot and killed him.

"It was investigated and found to be a reasonable example of self-defense," Kasworm recounts. "Unfortunately he didn't get there in time to have bred that spring."




Dots represent Grizzly 839's movements from the Purcell Mountains in the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem eastward and eventually north near Glacier National Park in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem. Scientists have documented very few cases of grizzlies traveling between these two ecosystems, and the route provides insight about which pathway might be the highest priority for bears searching for new homes.

## *Conserving and Connecting*

Luck was kinder to 839, who passed safely across the Salish Range and returned to anonymity in the NCDE. And while his eastbound travel doesn't provide the genetic exchange crucial to the Cabinet-Yaak, it may benefit grizzly recovery in a different way.

"It gives us information about which routes might be the highest priority for those animals that are looking for new homes," Wood explains. "It tells us types of travel corridors they use, types of habitat they select. It helps guide and prioritize future projects in terms of the larger landscape matrix."

The landscape that 839 traversed was not protected wilderness. Tracing a U-shaped arc south of U.S. Highway 2, the young bear crossed large blocks of private timberland. But armed with data like 839's, conservationists are working hard to provide room for safer travel across this patchwork of land. In two places, the bear crossed corporate forestland that is now protected as habitat through the U.S. Forest Service's Forest Legacy Program. The federal fund supports sustainable management of private timberlands through conservation easements held by local land trusts, often safeguarding land that was once heavily logged so its forest might recover and provide important wildlife habitat.

In the Salish Mountains, that means targeting places that could help NCDE grizzlies reach the Cabinet-Yaak. "Each project is different but each one is important," says Wood, who frequently partners with the Forest Service in identifying ideal Forest Legacy project sites. He is currently working to protect 68,000 acres west of Kalispell that borders the habitat anchor of Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge.

"It's an area where at least a couple of bears have moved through," Wood says. "It'd be a real opportunity to conserve a big chunk of land right in the middle of the Cabinet-Yaak and the NCDE."

Grizzly 839 knew nothing of his species' fragmented range when he found himself caught for collaring in a foot snare at one of Kasworm's research sites. But the path he charted serves as a reminder that bears will move if we give them room to do so. Before long, another grizzly will attempt the reverse of 839's trip. Thanks to the habitat protection and conflict reduction work of Forest Legacy, Vital Ground and many more, that bear might just find the space and tolerance it needs to survive.

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***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 private lands and human impacts meet some of the wildest places left on the continent;
- Target projects that conserve critical lands, sustain habitat connections, and reduce conflicts between bears and people;
- Ground our projects on current science and strong collaborative partnerships.

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