A new year, a new look, and a new victory for wildlife in the Northern Rockies. Welcome to the redesigned Vital News, and thank you for your ongoing commitment to connecting landscapes and protecting wildlife.

This issue celebrates your remarkable effort to protect key roadless acres in the rugged Cabinet Mountains of northwest Montana. As of last December, the Weber Gulch project is complete! You empowered Vital Ground to step in and save a key chunk of remote private land from costly development, then finish the job by turning over the precious acres to the Lolo National Forest to be managed in tune with the surrounding roadless stronghold. Read about conserving this vital place on pages 6-7. 🐻
Just like grizzlies emerging from dens throughout the Northern Rockies, Vital Ground is shedding its “winter coat” and unveiling a complete rebranding to better capture the breadth of the work you make possible through your support. Underpinning the organization’s new look is its new logo—a design reflecting not only the image of the Great Bear, but also the landscape-scale benefits that flow from efforts to restore grizzlies throughout North America.

You’ve likely already noticed the improved layout and design of Vital News, and if you haven’t done so recently, take a few minutes to visit our new website, where you’ll find inspiring new photos, videos and stories bringing Vital Ground’s vision to audiences around the globe. If you don’t subscribe to Vital e-News by email, sign up now at www.VitalGround.org to receive periodic installments highlighting news most relevant to grizzly recovery.

Although we’re certainly hoping this new look inspires wildlife enthusiasts to become more deeply engaged in habitat conservation, your support continues to extend well beyond the organization’s packaging. A new year also means exciting new projects and an expanded strategic approach to Vital Ground’s work.

One of those projects yielded a big win for wildlife in December, when we finalized our transfer of the Weber Gulch parcel in Montana’s southern Cabinet Mountains to the Lolo National Forest. Your support saved this valuable buffer habitat from potential residential and road development, which will directly result in its ongoing management for quiet enjoyment by the public and wildlife alike (page 6).

The Weber Gulch project demonstrated a unique solution and it’s the kind of on-the-ground habitat protection that represents the heart and soul of Vital Ground. But we’re also expanding the second prong of our mission to prevent conflicts between bears and people. Thanks to new support from The ALSAM Foundation, Vital Ground is dramatically expanding its Conservation Partners Grant Program to help communities acclimate to expanding grizzly populations in certain areas. Illustrating these efforts to promote social tolerance of grizzlies, Vital Ground recently funded three new partners who are working to stop conflicts before they happen in parts of Montana (page 3).

And it’s not just Montana where grizzlies are making progress. Last week the Department of the Interior announced renewed support of expanded recovery efforts for grizzlies in Washington’s North Cascades Ecosystem (page 12). With your help, we’re more committed than ever to the bold and broad vision of grizzly recovery from the North Cascades to Yellowstone and up across the border into Canada. Your passion for conservation is helping us pinpoint the right places to protect and the strategic investments to get the job done—for you, for grizzlies, and for the whole wild community.
With grizzlies returning to parts of Montana and Idaho where they haven’t been seen in a century, your support of Vital Ground will stop conflicts before they happen thanks to new partnerships in the Big Hole, Madison and Mission valleys.

Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes – Electric Fencing Study

North of Missoula, the Mission Valley provides an agricultural haven for western Montana. Low in elevation—around 3,000 feet, compared to the jagged 8,000-10,000-foot peaks that tower above it—the valley has seen increased human development coincide with the recovery and expansion of the grizzly bear population in the Mission Mountains and elsewhere in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem. The result has been a sharp rise in bear-related conflicts.

With much of the valley on the Flathead Indian Reservation, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribal Wildlife Management Program responds to these incidents. Domestic livestock alone—chickens, pigs, goats, llamas and sheep—have caused friction with 30 different grizzly bears since 2010, with 13 incidents ending in bear extermination or relocation, according to tribal wildlife managers. And that’s not to mention the growing problem of grizzlies raiding cornfields in the valley—an easy meal that can be difficult for a hungry bear to resist.

(continued on page 4)
These actions made it a no-brainer for Vital Ground to support a new tribal initiative that will explore alternative electric fencing solutions to assist poultry producers in stopping conflicts with wildlife. A tribal wildlife manager currently enrolled in the wildlife biology graduate program at the University of Montana will lead the project, testing the effectiveness of different electric fencing configurations in deterring grizzly bears from poultry operations.

With the effort also including a public education component, this work could lead to widespread adoption of innovative conflict-prevention strategies up and down the Mission Valley, tactics used by organizations that we are eager to partner with.

**Big Hole Watershed Committee – Range Rider Program**

Southwest Montana’s Big Hole Watershed lies square in the crosshairs of grizzly connectivity. Perched between the Greater Yellowstone, Northern Continental Divide and Bitterroot ecosystems, this remote area could one day provide crucial corridor habitat where bears born in three different states intersect.

With the Big Hole’s first agency-confirmed grizzly sighting in several years occurring in 2016, the resettlement has begun. Now we must help the area’s residents prevent grizzly problems.

Leading the charge is the Big Hole Watershed Committee, a local stakeholder’s group whose governing board represents interests ranging from conservation to ranching to tourism. Our first partnership with BHWC will support a new Upper Big Hole Range Rider position. Drawing from the success of the Range Rider Program farther north in the Blackfoot Valley—a program Vital Ground has supported with grants in recent years—this new project will put a seasoned manager on the land and in the community, monitoring wolf and grizzly populations while collaborating with ranchers to quickly remove conflict-inducing livestock carcasses and modify grazing plans to account for wildlife movements.

It adds up to more boots on the ground—or in the stirrups, in this case—

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*At the Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center in West Yellowstone, Mont., grizzly bears test garbage containers. Ones that pass a battery of brutal tests are put into use as bear-proof garbage containers, installments that measurably lower the chances of human-bear conflicts.*
working for the coexistence of native wildlife and ranching in one of the newest hot spots for grizzly conservation.

People and Carnivores – Madison Valley Sanitation and Safety

Lying between the Big Hole and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem is the Madison Valley, home to one of Montana’s glittering blue-ribbon trout rivers, wilderness gateways for hunters and hikers, and the outdoor tourism industry that follows these opportunities. In the last decade, that industry has grown considerably, thanks in part to easy-to-use vacation-home rental websites like VRBO.com and AirBnB.com. It all begs the question: can new web technology coexist with bears?

Where vacation rentals in the Madison used to attract fewer and longer stays, the ease of e-booking a rental for a week of fishing or hiking now brings hundreds of new faces to the area each season. With the valley just 20 miles west of Yellowstone, these crowds come from far and wide, and their experience with grizzly bears varies widely.

That’s where People and Carnivores enters the picture. This small coexistence-minded organization has been working in communities outside of Yellowstone for more than 20 years. Now, with Vital Ground’s support, it is targeting vacation rentals in the Madison Valley with an expanded suite of bear-aware essentials. The new initiative will partner with vacation-rental owners to invest in bear-proof garbage containment and bear safety education on everything from print brochures to online videos to refrigerator magnets. As Yellowstone’s grizzlies range west and tourists follow, we’re proud to help bear-proof this iconic area for the benefit of every new arrival, whether grizzly or human. 🦊
Forty-three acres: it may not seem like much, but sometimes what happens on a small chunk of land can impact a far larger area—for better or for worse.

That’s how it was with Weber Gulch. Development of this isolated, roadless block of private land in Montana’s Cabinet Mountains could have become a huge thorn in the side of the U.S. Forest Service and a significant roadblock to wildlife stability in the region.

Instead—thanks to your support—Weber Gulch will remain a wild haven for grizzly bears and other wildlife. Vital Ground completed this urgent project in December when we donated the property to the Lolo National Forest, consolidating its management into the surrounding roadless stronghold.

Acquired in 2016 by Vital Ground, the steep, conifer-filled inholding near Thompson Falls, Mont., would have demanded an expensive and intrusive road construction process if its previous landowner had chosen to exercise access rights and develop the acreage. Now it will remain valuable seasonal habitat for a struggling grizzly population.

“Development of this parcel would have fragmented important wildlife habitat, especially for grizzly bears,” said USFS District Ranger David Hattis. “The acquisition will maintain the integrity of the Cube Iron-Mt. Silcox Roadless Area and preserve...
the scenic values that are identified as a goal for forest management in this area. Vital Ground has worked hard to make this happen, and we’re grateful for their important contributions on these public lands.”

Overlooking the Clark Fork Valley amid sprawling ponderosa pine forest, the Weber Gulch property hosts some of the southernmost undeveloped habitat for grizzly bears in the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service targeted a population of roughly 100 grizzlies in the Cabinet-Yaak when it developed the area’s grizzly bear recovery plan following threatened species listing under the Endangered Species Act in 1975. But today, the ecosystem’s grizzly population hovers around 50 animals, according to a recent study. It also shows a high risk of inbreeding due to its small size and genetic isolation from other populations.

The fragility of this group makes conserving habitat at the edge of the ecosystem—habitat like Weber Gulch—crucial to ongoing recovery. Bears particularly rely on transition zones like this in springtime, when snow still blankets the high country but traveling all the way to a developed valley bottom like the Clark Fork’s poses a high risk of human conflict.

Beyond bears, Weber Gulch serves as a popular access point for local hikers and hunters. A Forest Service trailhead at the base of the drainage provides entry to nearly 40,000 acres of roadless backcountry within the Cube Iron-Mt. Silcox area. Mid-elevation forest like the Weber Gulch parcel attracts elk and deer during fall and spring as they move between high-elevation summer grounds and lower winter range. The drainage is also visible from the Clark Fork Valley and Montana’s picturesque Highway 200.

“Although this parcel is relatively small, it is situated high above the valley floor, well above any other existing development, and directly within the viewshed of Thompson Falls and the Highway 200 corridor,” said Ryan Lutey, executive director of Vital Ground. “In addition to the ecological disruption and management challenges that development of the parcel would have created, it presented a significant threat to the attributes that make the lower Clark Fork Valley a popular scenic byway for tourism in western Montana.”

Because of the property’s situation within the designated roadless area, transfer to the Lolo National Forest will not change its value as wildlife habitat. Removing a private inholding will simplify the Forest Service’s management of the area while allowing Vital Ground to turn our resources toward new priorities as we honor your commitment to connecting landscapes and protecting wildlife.

Beyond the support of generous individuals like you, Vital Ground’s initial acquisition of the property was made possible by grants from the Montana Fish & Wildlife Conservation Trust, the Cinnabar Foundation, the Cross Charitable Foundation and the Chicago Zoological Society.
Like you, Mary Ann and Robert Melvin are conservation heroes who have acted on their belief in connecting landscapes and protecting wildlife.

The Melvins’ conservation legacy is truly inspiring and will live on in the wild animals and open space of northwest Montana. Recently, Mary Ann chose to honor Robert’s memory with a $50,000 donation to Vital Ground’s Wild River project.

“If you save one grizzly bear, that’s for my Bob,” Mary Ann said. “He would be so happy. I am so pleased to be a part of a project that saves these animals.”

In the coming decades, the Melvins’ gift may do just that, as they have joined a team of donors and partners committed to protecting Wild River in perpetuity. With the Melvins’ help, and yours, Vital Ground plans to complete the project by the end of 2018.

When all is said and done, Wild River will transform from a proposed residential subdivision into a wildlife pathway that connects two mountain ranges and two river systems.

In the process, you will protect the future of four threatened or endangered species: grizzly bears and Canada lynx that travel between the Cabinet and Purcell mountains, and bull trout and white sturgeon that migrate up the Kootenai and Yaak rivers to the streams where they have spawned since time immemorial.

Like so many of you, Robert Melvin had a long-standing love of animals. His mother used to rescue strays and mistreated animals during his childhood, and as an adult Bob became an animal activist. While living in San Diego, he and Mary Ann campaigned successfully against university research practices that mistreated stray dogs and cats.

When the Melvins moved to Oregon, they continued to advocate for the humane treatment of strays and also worked to stop the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service from using leg-hold traps on urban coyotes.

Bob was protesting the destruction of wildlife habitat in the Portland area at the time of his death in January 2016.

Now, his commitment and dedication to animals will live on in the wildlife corridor he and Mary Ann will help protect in Montana. 👏

To learn more about legacy gifts like the Melvins’, contact Development Director Kim Davitt at 406-549-8650 or kdavitt@vitalground.org. Call today or donate online at www.vitalground.org/campaign.
IN WILD TRUST: AN EVENING WITH LARRY AUMILLER

Thanks to all who attended our March event!

Friends of Vital Ground and the Great Bear filled Shakespeare & Co. Bookstore in Missoula on March 7 to hear Larry Aumiller share stories and photographs from his 30 years managing the McNeil River State Game Sanctuary in southwest Alaska. Now living in Missoula and serving as a Vital Ground advisor, Larry passed on his love of bears and conservation ethics to thousands of sanctuary visitors who learned that with the right safety practices, brown bears and people can live alongside one another. Read more about Larry’s inspiring career and the bears of McNeil in Jeff Fair’s new book, In Wild Trust, available via Bear Mart at www.VitalGround.org/shop. Our heartfelt thanks to Larry and all of you who came out to the event! 🐻
Beyond habitat protection, your conservation values directly support the prevention of bear-related conflicts across grizzly country. Vital Ground’s Conservation Partners Grant Program funds community efforts—from electric fences to bear spray—that keep both grizzlies and people safe.

As grizzlies reclaim historic range over the next five years, they will have a new ally in avoiding trouble. Introducing The ALSAM Foundation, your newest teammate in bear awareness.

Beginning in 2018, The ALSAM Foundation is making a five-year, $250,000 commitment to support conflict-prevention projects through Vital Ground’s Conservation Partners Grant Program.

“There’s a direct and tangible connection between healthy, wild landscapes and healthy, vibrant communities,” says Ryan Lutey, Vital Ground’s executive director. “Vital Ground and The ALSAM Foundation are making an investment to strengthen that connection by increasing the social carrying capacity of those landscapes for grizzlies and other wildlife.”

What will this investment look like? Check out the partner projects you supported last year (story on pages 3-5). In Montana’s Big Hole and Madison valleys, you funded community coexistence projects—a range rider program and bear-aware education for vacationers—in places where grizzlies are just beginning their comeback. These projects represent something rare these days—anticipating a problem and nipping it in the bud.

Now, with deep gratitude to The ALSAM Foundation, we’ll be able to invest even further in conflict prevention—and, as a result, in the Great Bear’s future across its native homelands.
BEAR MART RETRO SALE!

Vital Ground has a new logo. Here’s your last chance to get merchandise with the old logo!
Order (and see more great deals!) at www.vitalground.org/shop

**Women’s L.L. Bean Pullover Jacket**
Athletic design features side panels, raglan sleeves, non-chafing flatlock seams and a droptail hem for comfort and style. UPF 40+ rated for all-day protection from the sun’s UV rays.
Price $58.00  SALE $45.00

**Vital Ground Hooded Sweatshirt**
Featuring Vital Ground logos on front and back, this hoodie is incredibly warm and comfy and shrink resistant.
Price $55.00  SALE $40.00

**Miniature Wooden Canoe Paddle**
Features painted Adirondack details and bear paw track. Measures 11” long and hangs by jute rope.
Price $9.00  SALE $6.00

**Men’s Sport Tek Pullover Jacket**
Features a zip pocket on sleeve, 100% Polyester.
Color: Royal Blue. Available sizes: S, M, L, XL.
Price $40.00  SALE: $19.00
Steep, remote mountainsides. Deep winter snowpack. Lush meadows full of wildflowers. The North Cascades of Washington state have it all—all except for grizzly bears, that is.

But that may be changing sooner than expected. Thanks to the hard work of grizzly supporters like you, the Great Bear’s recovery in the North Cascades took a surprising step forward last month.

In a brief visit to North Cascades National Park, Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke offered support for returning the grizzly to its historic range within the park and surrounding ecosystem. Last year, the Interior Department halted the Park Service’s process of measuring public support for grizzly reintroduction, but in his recent trip to the North Cascades, Sec. Zinke said it was time to bring back the Great Bear and to “look ahead 100 years, and connect wildlife corridors and landscapes,” according to a Seattle Times report.

As a Vital Ground supporter, you helped make this change happen! Last year, Vital Ground submitted one of over 126,000 public comments to the Park Service in response to its proposal of several possible grizzly reintroduction plans. We offered our full endorsement of the two options that call for gradual reintroduction of grizzlies via translocation, with a goal of establishing a stable population of 200 bears over the next 60-100 years.

Vital Ground has also supported several educational initiatives in the North Cascades through our Conservation Partners Grant Program. From a documentary film to school visits, these projects spread the word about the grizzly’s historic home in the region, and how electric fencing, bear spray and other technologies can help communities prepare for a Bear Aware future.

That future is now closer to reality, and the Great Bear is closer to once again roaming the wilds of Washington’s great range.
THANK YOU, MEMPHIS ZOOKEEPERS AND FRIENDS!

Memphis, Tenn., is a long way from grizzly country—unless, of course, you’re talking about basketball and the city’s NBA team, the Memphis Grizzlies.

But that doesn’t mean that wild grizzlies are forgotten in the Blues City. In fact, they have a whole bunch of new allies there.

That’s because last month the Memphis Chapter of the American Association of Zookeepers (AAZK) hosted a “Beers for Bears” fundraiser in support of Vital Ground. By the end of the night, conservation-minded folks had contributed more than $1,000 to connecting landscapes and protecting wildlife!

“Our motto is ‘Conservation, Education,’” says Sarah Doherty, vice president of the Memphis AAZK chapter. “We chose Vital Ground not only because of the conservation efforts you do for grizzly populations, but also the educational message you give to the general public.”

From all of us at Vital Ground headquarters, a huge thank you to all who attended the Memphis event! We’re thrilled to have the Memphis AAZK chapter as a new partner in conservation, joining the Brookfield, Ill., chapter that holds an annual spaghetti dinner in support of Vital Ground.

Special thanks to Memphian and Vital Ground board member Theresa Young, whose organization and support made the event possible.

Here’s to many more “Beers for Bears,” Memphis! 🍻
moving grizzly bears is no easy task. It’s far better to let them move themselves.

That’s the takeaway from a new study published in The Wildlife Society’s *Journal of Wildlife Management*. The investigation analyzes 40 years of grizzly translocation events performed in Alberta, Canada. It determines that out of 110 attempts, just 33 translocations—or 30 percent—succeeded.

That conclusion supports some long-established foundations for our work here at Vital Ground. Wildlife managers use translocation both to remove problem bears from an area and to bolster recovering grizzly populations. In either case, the new research demonstrates that relocating bears, while sometimes effective, is far from a cure-all.

On multiple fronts, your support of Vital Ground mitigates the need for translocation attempts. We work to stop bear-human conflicts before they happen, helping reduce the number of problem bears that require relocation. Meanwhile, moving bears across ecosystems to help struggling populations recover is expensive and risky. Instead, grizzlies need enough connected and protected habitat to allow natural movements and gene flow between subpopulations.

In other words, they need the kind of corridors that Vital Ground supporters like you are working to conserve.
New Home, New Risk

Wildlife managers have long known that translocations are not guaranteed to succeed. “Did the bear stay?”, “Did it stay out of trouble?”, and “Did it reproduce?” are the usual questions for evaluating a move, and the new study keeps that baseline, deeming a translocation successful if the bear did not require “further management action” and survived a year without attempting to return home.

But lead author Sarah Milligan and her team also dig deeper, using tracking data to compare the range size, habitat selection, and denning behavior of moved bears to their counterparts. They find that while bears new to an area denned similarly to longtime residents, transplants range farther than established bears, creating an average travel area 3.25 times larger than grizzlies native to the place.

This finding is troublesome, as a transplanted bear ranging farther than its counterparts is more likely to stumble upon developed areas and human-related conflict. That’s especially fraught when bears are relocated to bolster a struggling population in a fragmented, conflict-prone landscape, like the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem of northwest Montana. With smaller habitat cores than other recovery zones, a wandering grizzly new to the Cabinet-Yaak could easily stumble upon human development, putting in jeopardy the costly effort to move the bear.

That’s where you and Vital Ground come in. Our Conservation Partners Grant Program helps stop conflicts before they happen, supporting community-led projects like electric fencing, bear-proof waste containment, range rider programs and more. These efforts lower the need for relocating problem bears and, when grizzlies are moved to aid another population’s recovery, they help the adjusting transplant stay out of trouble.

The Next Steps

Despite the low success rate, translocation will remain an option in the toolbox of wildlife managers. In Washington’s North Cascades Ecosystem, for example, moving bears from other populations would be a necessary step if managers approve a grizzly reintroduction plan for the area. In the Cabinet-Yaak, meanwhile, the successful translocation of a female grizzly nicknamed Irene helped this struggling subpopulation rebound from the brink of extinction.

Irene’s move may have worked because of its distance—she came from the Glacier-Bob Marshall area, more than 50 miles away. The study found that the farther the move, the more likely it is to succeed, and that translocations were more successful when performed earlier in the year, giving the bear more time to learn the new area before fall calorie-loading and winter denning.

But with less than a third of all translocations successful, the message is clear: grizzlies have a much better shot at strengthening their populations and reclaiming historic range when they move at their own will, and when communities chip in to help them stay out of trouble.
The Vital Ground Foundation’s mission is to protect and restore North America’s grizzly bear populations for future generations by conserving wildlife habitat, and by supporting programs that reduce conflicts between bears and humans.

In support of this mission, we:

- Protect habitat that grizzlies need to survive including other species that share their range;
- 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 prevent conflicts between bears and people;
- Ground our projects on current science and strong collaborative partnerships.

As a 501(c)(3) charitable nonprofit, our success depends on you!
Visit www.vitalground.org to donate or become a member.