

# VITALNEWS

*"Evening on the Yaak" by Lance Schelvan*

CONNECTING ONE LANDSCAPE FOR WILDLIFE AND PEOPLE

## LINKING THE LANDSCAPE, ACRE BY PROTECTED ACRE

Every spring, grizzly bear cubs emerge from their dens tiny, near-blind and highly vulnerable. Their mothers scramble to find food so they can nurse the cubs through a period of rapid growth. If they're lucky and smart, a cub or two from the litter of 1-3 will reach adulthood.

This is a time of year when bears, elk, bighorn sheep and so many more animals need Vital Ground. They need restored, plant-rich habitat in havens like Bismark Meadows in northern Idaho and the Yaak Valley of Montana. And they need protected private lands in the key corridors that link their wild strongholds.

Bear cubs and bighorn lambs aren't the only ones vulnerable this spring. As we enter a period of economic and environmental upheaval, we're all worried for the future. We take solace in the staying power of protected land, persistent wildlife and supporters like you.

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## *During Trying Times, We Look to the Land in Gratitude*



Your fellow Vital Ground supporters are scattered across America, flung even as far as the United Kingdom and Australia. But we are all drawn together by wilderness, wildlife and a vision for the future that hosts wild grizzlies on a landscape scale. From a distance, we stand together against the continued erosion of wildlife strongholds, and we collaborate to increase the public understanding of what grizzlies will require to persist.

That dispersed unity underpins the strength of the organization. It brings together diverse views, ingenuity and inspiration from throughout the country and around the globe. It also emphasizes the irony that during Vital Ground's 30th anniversary year, we very well may be unable to gather in person to celebrate all that we've achieved in three decades together. But at a safe distance, we'll still honor the many things for which we're grateful.

This spring, Vital Ground is celebrating a reinvigorated collaboration with an old partner, The Humane Society Wildlife Land Trust (see p. 6). Many of you will remember when the Trust's late executive director, Bob Koons, then serving as Vital Ground's board chair, helped stabilize and relocate the organization to the heart of grizzly country in Montana. That move brought Vital Ground together with partners from throughout the region who have since helped guide the organization to its pivotal role in grizzly bear conservation.

We're also celebrating teaming up with the Quinn family and Missoula County to leverage previous conservation investments and add another important installment to the Elk Flats Neighbors project in Montana's Swan Valley (see p. 10).

COVID-19 may foreclose opportunities for us to connect in person for a while, but don't let it curtail your connections to the land. Whether or not grizzlies roam near you, find time to get out and appreciate your local trails, parks or other open spaces where you can recharge your passion for the outdoors. I've no doubt that Vital Ground supporters will continue to embody—both individually and as vital members of the organization—the same resilience that we work to enable for wildlife.

A healthy, protected landscape allows wildlife to adapt to a changing world over the long term. In the short term, it sustains our own physical and emotional resilience. In this trying time, I'm more grateful than ever to live in the Northern Rockies amid plentiful open space and a rich wildlife community. I'm also more grateful than ever to be a part of the Vital Ground team, working with you to protect this precious place.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ryan". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Ryan Lutey, Executive Director

# VITAL GROUND AT 30

WHERE WE'VE BEEN — AND WHERE YOU'RE TAKING US



Thirty years ago, Doug and Lynne Seus had a wild idea. Working as animal trainers, they were far from retirement and lived in Utah, but the couple decided to spend their savings on a piece of swampland beside a river in Montana.

Pine Butte Swamp Preserve (pictured above) wasn't just any wetland. The purchase of 240 acres along the Teton River was the debut project of Vital Ground, which the Seuses founded in 1990.

Lying on the eastern edge of the vast Bob Marshall Wilderness, the land around Pine Butte serves as a buffer between rugged mountains and fenced ranchlands, a crucial transition zone for grizzly bears. The Seuses loved grizzlies. By then, the cub they'd adopted and trained, Bart, was Hollywood's biggest star (pounds-wise at least).

As Bart's fame grew, so did the Seuses' idea: that they ought to give back to Bart's wild cousins, one protected piece of habitat at a time.

Three decades later, Doug and Lynne's vision has made its mark. Vital Ground has helped protect and enhance roughly 620,000 acres of wild country. While the Seuses' legacy deserves a magazine of its own (and the fall issue of *Vital News* will have much more on the past 30 years), the mission to protect grizzlies and other wildlife for future generations is far from accomplished. With our focus honed in on saving the most crucial corridors for wildlife in the Northern Rockies, your support is carrying our story into its next chapter.

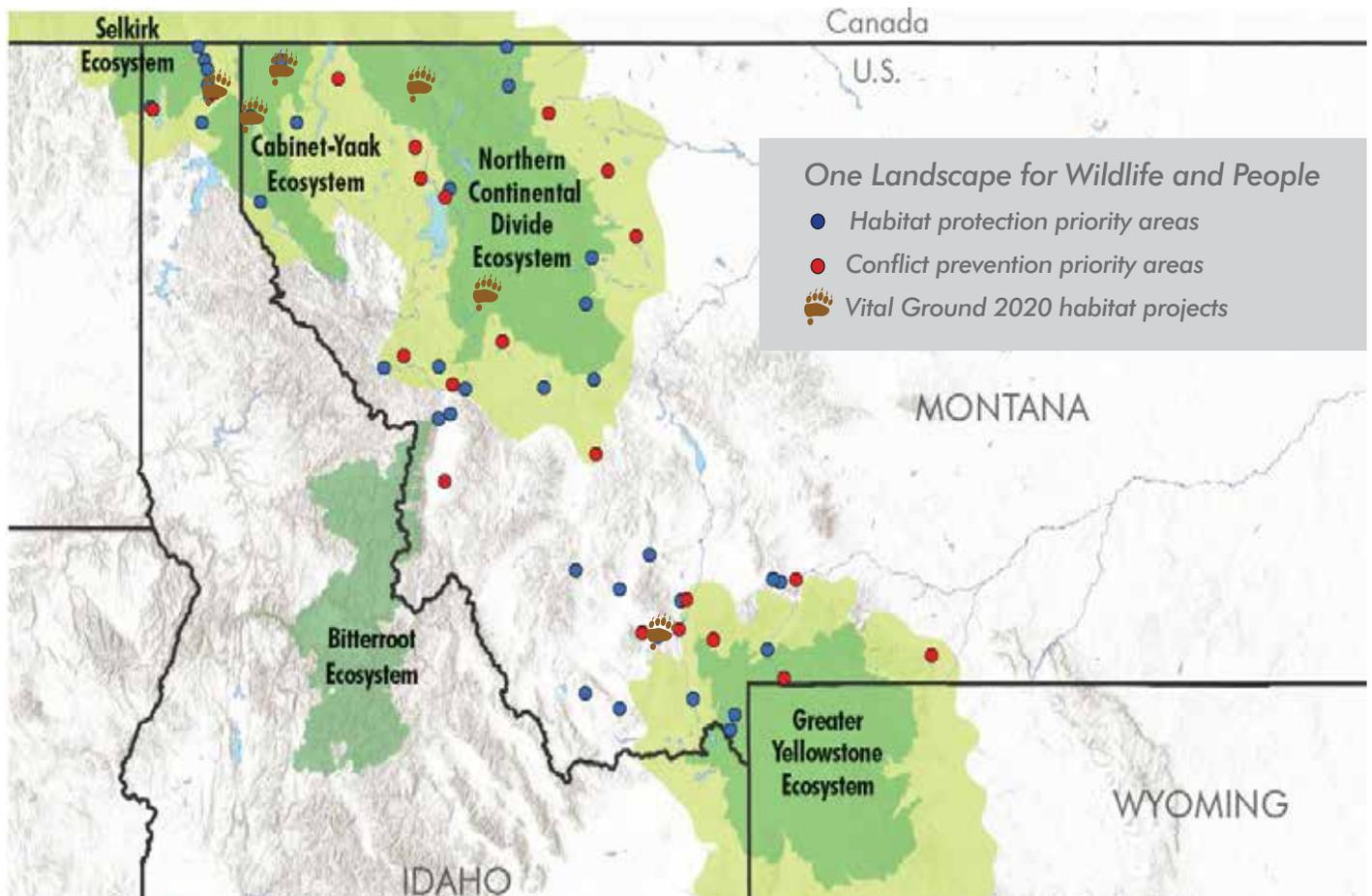
Last year, Vital Ground launched the One Landscape Initiative, a strategic push to protect 188,000 acres of key private lands that connect the strongholds of our region's unique, diverse wildlife community (see map on next page). From Wyoming to Washington, these corridors are lifelines for grizzly bears, wolves, elk, Canada lynx, bull trout and countless other species that need freedom to

(continued on page 4)

(continued from page 3)

move as new human encroachment and climate change disrupt their environment. One Landscape also preserves open space for people who cherish clean air, water and forests, fundamental resources that more of us have recognized as invaluable during our recent months of physical distancing.

conflict prevention programs that keep wildlife and people safe in rural areas linking Yellowstone, central Idaho and western Montana; and we're making strides toward new habitat protection in the Selkirk-Purcell corridor of northern Idaho, the Tobacco Root Mountains northwest of Yellowstone and other key connection areas for wildlife.



Mapping One Landscape: Darker green areas show federally-designated grizzly bear recovery zones while light green shows the grizzly's currently-inhabited range. Grizzly paws represent 2020 habitat projects. This year's conflict prevention partnerships will be announced in the fall newsletter and at [vitalground.org/news!](https://vitalground.org/news)

"We've got a planet to save in a time of unprecedented environmental pressures," says Doug Chadwick, a founding and current Vital Ground trustee. "The One Landscape strategy is a big step toward securing a future for one of the most intact, wildlife-rich, and lovely regions left."

Thanks to supporters like you, Vital Ground has made notable progress toward One Landscape. Together, we have completed priority projects in Montana's Kootenai Valley corridor and Ninemile-Clark Fork linkage area; we have partnered on

Every acre of protected land has been busy storing carbon and slowing global temperature rise while giving wildlife room to adapt to new realities. Even if they weren't talking about climate change 30 years ago, Doug and Lynne have left us a model matching the needs of the 21st century.

With your support driving us, Vital Ground is moving boldly forward full of hope. After all, it was the bold and hopeful action of one couple that started us down this path in the first place. 🐾

# SAVE HABITAT TODAY!

*Protect key land for grizzly bears and other wildlife. Become a monthly member.*

We know you cherish the majesty of the wild places that grizzlies and other wildlife call home, and we truly value the ongoing support and dedication that you have provided over the years. To show our appreciation, we have enhanced our monthly giving program to deliver timely and frequent member benefits to monthly members. You will receive a link containing downloadable bonuses, including something for adults and youngsters. We will also send you our monthly email newsletter and invitations to member webinars, project site visits and other special events. During a time of environmental and economic turmoil, monthly members will sustain our work on behalf of wildlife. Thank you so much for considering making the switch to monthly giving!

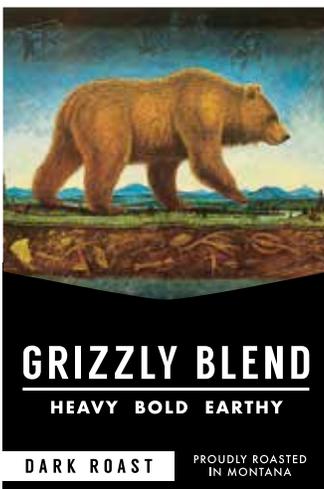
*-- Kevin Rhoades, Director of Communications, Marketing and Membership*

To start a new monthly giving membership, go to <https://give.vitalground.org/recurring>

## sample monthly impacts:

 <p><b>GET INVOLVED IN WILDLIFE CONSERVATION!</b> \$5</p> <p>For the price of one cappuccino a month, help conserve wildlife habitat in the Northern Rockies!</p>	 <p><b>SPONSOR AN ACRE!</b> \$30</p> <p>Your monthly investment can help connect land in some of the most important biological strongholds in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Washington, British Columbia and Alaska.</p>	 <p><b>CONSERVE LAND FOR MOOSE, LYNX AND OTHER WILDLIFE!</b> \$50</p> <p>Help protect grizzly habitat, which benefits entire plant and animal communities in some of the wildest, most scenic places on Earth.</p>	 <p><b>INVEST IN VITAL GROUND'S ONE LANDSCAPE INITIATIVE!</b> \$100</p> <p>Help protect 188,000 acres of crucial habitat and link wild strongholds while also supporting local communities to prevent bear-human conflicts in 21 priority locations in the Northern Rockies.</p>
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Logo art by Monte Dolack



  
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# SAFE IN THE VALLEY

VITAL GROUND, HUMANE SOCIETY WILDLIFE LAND TRUST  
PROTECT KEY GRIZZLY HABITAT IN MONTANA'S YAAK

The Yaak River flows through the Broadie Habitat Preserve, 215 acres now protected by Vital Ground and the Humane Society Wildlife Land Trust. (Photo by Mitch Doherty)

By Matt Hart

Tucked amid the rugged mountains and dense forest of Montana's northwestern corner, the Yaak Valley hosts one of North America's smallest, most vulnerable grizzly bear populations.

Biologists estimate that just 25-30 grizzlies endure in the Yaak and studies show them to be largely isolated from neighboring bears in Idaho, British Columbia and other Montana wildlands. Of those couple dozen grizzlies, just a handful are females in their reproductive years.

In other words, the Yaak's grizzly population lives in real danger of blinking out entirely. These bears are a resilient bunch, but they may need help to survive the decades to come.

With your support, Vital Ground and the

Humane Society Wildlife Land Trust are providing some of that help. With the Trust providing a grant enabling the project, Vital Ground purchased 215 acres along the Yaak River and Lap Creek in late April, establishing the Broadie Habitat Preserve. Beyond helping grizzlies, the effort will support a mosaic of biodiversity, including the nationally threatened Canada lynx and bull trout along with state-designated species of concern such as wolverine and westslope cutthroat trout.

"Protecting this vital expanse of habitat is a significant victory for grizzlies, wolves and other wildlife," says Nicole Paquette, president and executive director of the Trust. "Along with providing substantial funding for purchase of the property, the Trust worked with Vital Ground to establish a

permanent commitment to prohibiting commercial and recreational hunting and trapping on the land. This commitment to humane stewardship strengthens protection of the land as a permanent safe haven for the Yaak's grizzly population and all wildlife residing here."

The project will carry conservation impact far beyond the preserve itself. The site borders Kootenai National Forest lands to the east and west and other conserved private lands to the north and south, meaning its protection solidifies a safe corridor across the Yaak Valley bottom for wildlife of many sizes and habitat needs. The project site includes the confluence of the Yaak River and Lap Creek, with the two waterways making a large portion of the preserve particularly valuable riparian habitat.

"Between the Yaak River and Lap Creek, nearly a mile's worth of stream frontage occurs on the property, which illustrates how even a modestly-sized acquisition like this can provide outsized conservation benefits," says Ryan Lutey, Vital Ground's executive director. "Protection of this important river bottom can help filter and store water to augment downstream water quality, and its location at the confluence of these two streams provides high quality fish habitat while meeting important seasonal needs for wildlife species that

range far beyond the property's boundaries."

With much of the site cleared and grazed during past decades, the project will continue with habitat restoration work now that the land is conserved in perpetuity. While Vital Ground will own the property and lead restoration efforts, the Trust's commitment to saving key biodiversity strongholds as true safe havens for wildlife launched the effort.

Spurring the project was the vision and generosity of longtime Trust friend and supporter Wanda Broadie Alexander, for whom the preserve is named and whose conservation legacy will be felt on the land for generations. Key support also came from the Galesi Family Foundation, the Pegasus Foundation and other individual donors.

The Yaak Valley's new habitat preserve promises safe travel during a time of need for sensitive wildlife. As climate change alters many species' habitat options and seasonal patterns, protected lands along river corridors give animals the ability to cross valleys and move between wild strongholds, a key to climate resilience according to numerous studies.

For the Yaak's small but enduring group of grizzly bears, that kind of safe passage may prove to be the difference between extinction and survival. 🐾

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## FROM STUFFED BEARS TO SAVING HABITAT

By Tatum McConnell

A little while back, Vital Ground got to solve a nonprofit's favorite kind of mystery. First, we started noticing donations pouring in on behalf of someone named Kloe. We were intrigued and a little follow-up uncovered a great story.

The donations, it turns out, were the result of a young Vital Ground supporter's request that her family and friends support grizzly bear conservation for her 10th birthday! I caught up with Kloe and her stepmom Anna through video chat to learn more about Kloe's fundraiser and her interest in helping grizzly bears.

Kloe told me that her interest in grizzly bears began with Murray, a big, fluffy, well-loved teddy bear that her dad gave her a few years ago. Since then she's added another grizzly to her collection and they've become her favorite animal.

"I really like Murray so I wanted to help the grizzly bears," Kloe said. She also said that Murray loves to play fight with her grandpa's black bear stuffy who's named Teddy.

After a classmate started a fundraiser to help Australian wildlife impacted by last year's bushfires, Kloe realized she might be able to help wildlife as well. Kloe learned about grizzly bears' need for protected and connected habitat as they face the challenges of ongoing habitat

encroachment and climate change. When her 10th birthday came around she decided she wanted to help grizzlies in particular.

With some help from Google, Kloe and Anna found Vital Ground and were drawn to our mission to protect habitat for grizzly bears and other wildlife. They learned about how grizzlies serve as an umbrella species, using all parts of their ecosystem, so that protecting habitat for them means protecting habitat for countless other species as well.

For her birthday, Kloe had a sleepover with some friends and asked them for donations to Vital Ground in lieu of gifts. Anna and Kloe also sent info and a link to donate to guests' family members. Thanks to Kloe's generosity, we received many donations that will help protect vital land for grizzly



Meet Kloe, a 10-year old conservationist whose love for grizzlies began with her stuffed bear, Murray, and led to a birthday fundraiser on behalf of Vital Ground and habitat protection!

bears and other wildlife.

Kloe says she's concerned by climate change and would like to learn more about it. She's an avid reader and budding scientist.

"I like to read books," Kloe said, "and now because of homeschool Anna reads me an element of the day and I'm really interested in the elements."

Anna added that homeschooling during the coronavirus quarantine period is allowing them to spend a little more time learning about science.

"She's learning a lot more about the

environment," Anna said. "We can go outside and plant a vegetable garden or look at science books."

When she's not helping grizzlies or following her scientific curiosity, Kloe loves to ride bikes, swim, play Minecraft, and play with Murray. She says she'd love to be a writer when she grows up.

We're so inspired by Kloe and grateful for her support of grizzly bears. However large or small, every donation and fundraiser goes a long way toward helping preserve wildlife habitat and healthy grizzly populations for years to come! 🐾

## LONG-TERM GIVING FOR SHORT-TERM ACTION

*Help us respond to key conservation opportunities. Leave a legacy for wildlife habitat.*

Vital Ground often has the chance to purchase land or easements on a moment's notice before habitat is developed or subdivided.

Last month, nearby residents informed us about a property for sale adjacent to Glacier National Park and located in one of our One Landscape priority areas. Permanent protection of the 110-acre parcel would expand secure habitat and greatly benefit one of the richest wildlife populations in the Lower 48. But located adjacent to Glacier Park and the Middle Fork of the Flathead River, it is unlikely to remain on the market for long.

Bequests and other planned gifts provide resources that could allow Vital Ground to respond to opportunities like this. Your legacy giving could permanently protect key wildlife habitat before it gets developed.

In times of great change and sudden



upheaval there are new opportunities for long-term conservation and funding strategies. We are here to work with you to leave a legacy that matters: protection of the most threatened and vital landscapes for one of the richest wildlife communities in North America.

Please call 406.549.8650 or email [kdavitt@vitalground.org](mailto:kdavitt@vitalground.org) to learn more about how to leave a lasting gift for future generations of people and wildlife. Thank you.

-- Kim Davitt, Development Director

### New Tax Deduction

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the CARES Act now allows up to \$300 per taxpayer (\$600 for a married couple) in annual charitable contributions to be deducted if you take the standard deduction and don't itemize your deductions at tax time.



# GOOD BEARS, VITAL LAND

NEW EASEMENT WITH THE QUINN FAMILY  
HELPS SWAN VALLEY CORRIDOR STAY OPEN

Trail camera footage shows a grizzly bear foraging on the Quinn family's newly-conserved land in Montana's Swan Valley, a key wildlife corridor. (Image courtesy of Jim Quinn)

By Matt Hart

In Montana's Swan Valley, grizzly bears, wolverine, moose and wolves cross the roads and backyards that lie between mountain ranges. Separating the Mission Mountains and the Bob Marshall Wilderness, the rural valley is both a crucial wildlife corridor and a blueprint for collaborative, community-driven conservation.

Two hundred acres in the heart of the Swan are now protected forever as open space and wildlife habitat after Vital Ground completed a conservation easement with the Quinn family in the final days of 2019. With Missoula County and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks contributing funds to the project, the agreement helps grizzly bears and other animals pass safely across the valley, adding to a growing tapestry of conservation lands near the village of Condon.

"The Swan Valley provides critical linkage within the Yellowstone-to-Yukon region," says Jim Quinn,

who lives on the property with his wife, Terry. "This connection bridges two of the most intact mountain ecosystems remaining on Earth. This is one of the world's few remaining areas with the geographic variety and biological diversity to accommodate the wide-scaled adaptive responses that might allow whole populations of plants and animals to survive climate change."

## LANDSCAPE CONNECTIONS

The Swan Valley lies in the heart of grizzly country, part of the larger Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE), as wildlife biologists and managers call the lands in and around Glacier National Park and the Bob Marshall Wilderness. The NCDE is home to the Lower 48's largest estimated grizzly bear population, with roughly 1,000 grizzlies calling the area home.

But encroaching human development in areas like the Swan, Mission and Blackfoot valleys splits

the NCDE into fragments of contiguous habitat. To avoid isolation and maintain genetic variation, grizzlies need to be able to traverse these valleys and seek mates in new areas, and they need space and safety to make those crossings.

That's why Vital Ground and other conservation groups have long focused on protecting habitat in the Swan. The Quinns' easement adjoins several other properties protected by Vital Ground, part of the larger Elk Flats Neighbors Project that now includes seven easements and over 500 protected acres near Condon. Vital Ground's overall conservation impact in the Swan is double that, with 12 easements totaling around 1,000 acres.

"Like many of the Elk Flats neighbors, the Quinn family's ties to this land run as deep as their passion for wildlife conservation," says Mitch Doherty, conservation manager for Vital Ground. "This project is evidence of their commitment to ensuring the Swan Valley will be a stronghold for grizzly bears and other wildlife well into the future."

of the project. Vital Ground also transferred an adjacent 40-acre property that it owned to the Quinns, with a separate easement on that parcel accompanying the primary 160-acre agreement.

All told, the result is permanent protection of 200 acres, most of which have been in the Quinn family for more than 70 years. For its current stewards, Jim and Terry Quinn, the outcome not only secures the family's conservation legacy, but also protects a future for some of America's most iconic and imperiled wildlife.

"We want to do everything we can with our land to put it into permanent conservation," says Jim Quinn. "We see lots of grizzlies walking through our place and they're all good bears. We haven't had one bit of trouble with any of them. Right now the grizzly bear in the Lower 48 states has lost almost all of its habitat, so we look forward to working with as many people as possible to help them understand the importance of this animal. Hopefully they'll always be on our landscape." 🐾

## COLLABORATIVE CONSERVATION

Achieving permanent protection for the Quinns' acreage turned into both a creative and highly collaborative undertaking that showcases how nonprofit land trusts, state and local government and private landowners can work together to achieve durable conservation. Using funds from its 2006 Open Space Bond, Missoula County joined Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks as significant backers



Vital Ground staff and Missoula County commissioners walk on the Quinn property in Montana's Swan Valley. This unique project relied on collaboration between Vital Ground, state and local government and conservation-minded landowners.

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Watch an interview with Jim Quinn on Vital Ground's YouTube: [www.youtube.com/ForTheGrizzly](http://www.youtube.com/ForTheGrizzly)

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## Bringing Beavers Back to Bismark Meadows

By Kali Becher, Land Steward

On a cold morning last October, I hauled piles of willow limbs while others chipped away at the ice covering Reeder Creek where it runs through our Bismark Meadows property. Located near Priest Lake in Idaho's northwestern corner, this is one of the larger wetland and meadow complexes in the area. It provides important seasonal habitat for grizzly bears, particularly sows with newborn cubs that seek the spring's first green plant growth here.

As a valley peatland—a very rare habitat type in Idaho—Bismark Meadows has high biodiversity, hosting 13 rare plant species. The area was significantly altered in the early 1900s when portions of the wetlands were ditched and drained to be used for agriculture. As a result, a key resident of the meadow was kicked out: the beaver.

Now, only remnant portions of the wetlands remain, with many areas dominated by invasive reed canary grass. With much of the wetland habitat gone, beavers have not come back. Our current stewardship work at Bismark Meadows is focused on changing these two trends and restoring areas of native wetland.

While there are a variety of ways to do this, some very expensive, there is also one strategy that is quite simple at its core: bring back beavers. Why? Beavers are ecosystem engineers. They dramatically alter their habitat by taking down trees and shrubs and building dams. These actions provide an impressively long list of benefits: filtering

pollution, storing groundwater, preventing floods, storing carbon, and creating wetlands.

At Bismark Meadows, having beavers back would help return portions of the meadow to wetland and combat the invasive reed canary grass. Research has shown that beaver dams raise the water table and increase the amount of time the area is covered by water, which can decrease the presence of reed canary grass. This change in hydrology would create conditions more suitable for native wetland species, helping them out-compete the invasive grass.

Unfortunately, it is not as simple as dropping a few beavers at the property. There is currently little suitable habitat for them, so they would likely leave to seek out a better home. Therefore, the first step is to create better habitat conditions for them, and then let them do the rest.

We set to work that October day to install beaver dam analogs (BDAs)—essentially a fake beaver dam—in the creek running through the meadow. Along with staff from our project partners at Idaho Natural Resource Conservation Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Cramer Fish Sciences, we installed two BDAs, trying our best to replicate the complex structures beavers construct in streams. We used a combination of posts set in the



Project partners install an imitation beaver dam at our Bismark Meadows site in northern Idaho.

stream, willow branches, sediment from the stream and pine boughs. Halfway through the day we could already see the structures working as water pooled behind them.

If the project goes as planned, the BDAs will provide many of the benefits of a real beaver dam, creating conditions needed for native wetland vegetation to establish and decreasing the prevalence of reed canary grass. We will need to help along the way by planting willows and maintaining the BDAs until beavers can move back to their old home and get to work. When they do, they will help return some of the meadow to wetland conditions, improving habitat for numerous wildlife species—with little to no assistance from us.

## New Forest Service Partnership Protecting Gateway to Glacier

Last year, Vital Ground supported Flathead Land Trust and the Coolidge Family on a conservation easement near Polebridge, Mont., a rural community in the shadow of Glacier National Park (see story in Fall 2019 issue of *Vital News*). Now, we're teaming up with the Forest Service to protect a nearby 10-acre property. The site connects two blocks of adjacent Forest Service lands, making it a

prime addition to the area's conservation footprint.

Lying along the North Fork of the Flathead River, the Polebridge area is part of a thriving, intact wildlife community. It also lies at the doorstep of a park that hosted more than 3 million visitors in 2019. Subdivision and dense development in the valley would threaten animals' ability to move freely while staying out of trouble with people. It could also hamper the public's access to one of the crown jewels of our national park system.

Vital Ground is providing supporting funds for the Forest Service's purchase of the property. The project will also utilize the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), which dedicates royalty fees from offshore drilling toward conservation efforts. LWCF has been in the national news recently, as a bipartisan support effort in Congress has it on the verge of full and permanent funding.

"This is an outstanding opportunity for collaborative conservation that benefits both people and wildlife," says Mitch Doherty, Vital Ground's conservation manager. "With the support of the Flathead National Forest, we are bringing more LWCF dollars to Montana to support a growing need for improved public land access and conservation of key wildlife habitat in the North Fork Valley." 🐾



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

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

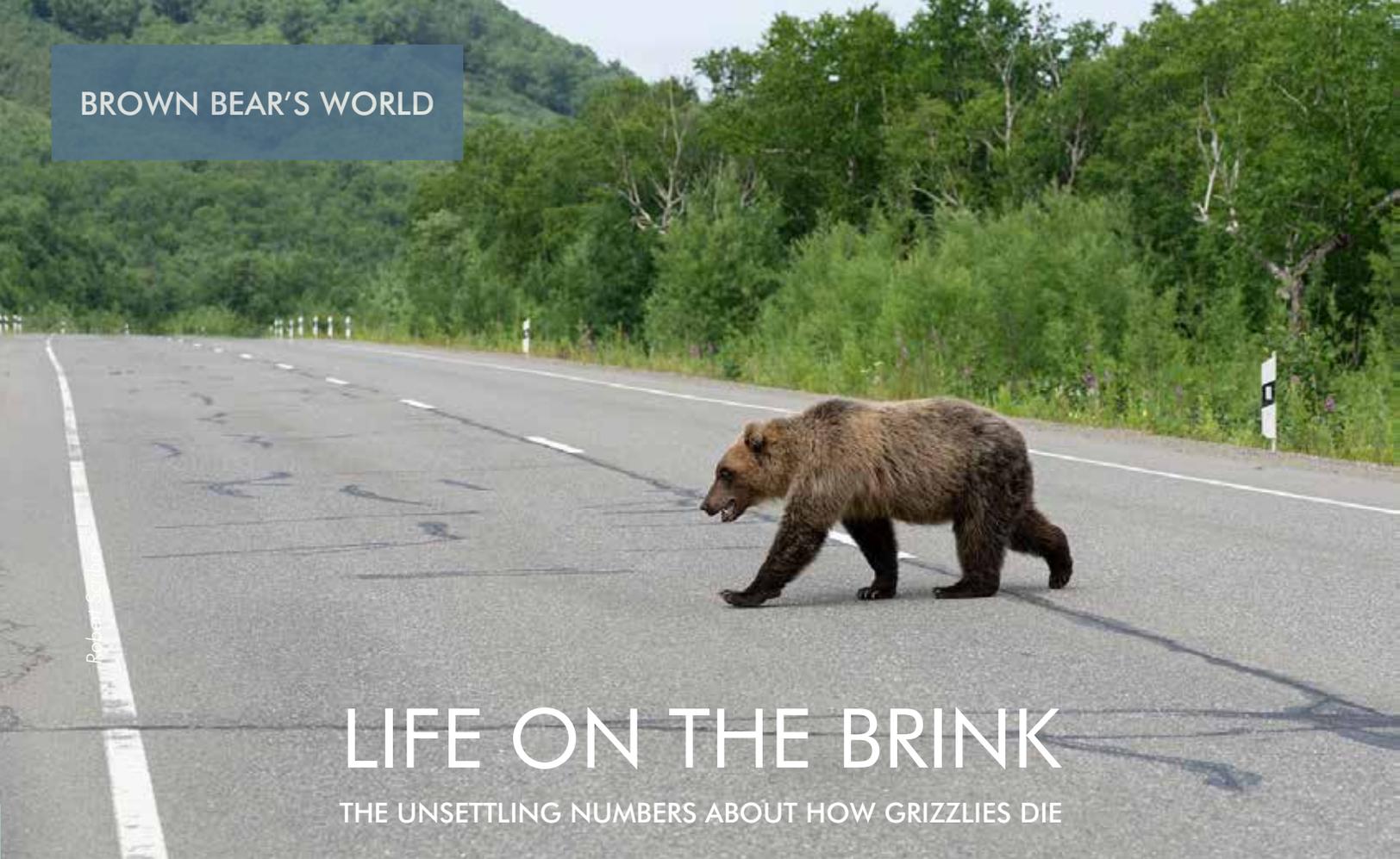
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To purchase Animal Scents products and support The Vital Ground Foundation, visit [Young Living's Animal Scents product page](#).



# LIFE ON THE BRINK

THE UNSETTLING NUMBERS ABOUT HOW GRIZZLIES DIE

By Tatum McConnell

There's a hard truth about grizzly bears in the Lower 48. When adult bears die, it's usually a human's fault. In northwestern Montana from 2004-2014, a state study estimated 71 percent of independent grizzly mortalities had human causes.

I was floored when I read this number. It seemed unbelievable that these animals we associate with wilderness could have fatal encounters with humans so often. I wanted to know why and as I started to dig into the data, it became clear that grizzlies live in a minefield of deadly situations.

From estimates in the state's 10-year study of the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE), poaching and malicious killing claim the most lives overall, nearly a third of human-related deaths at 32 percent. This is followed at 17 percent by agency removal, an event that occurs when a bear has had multiple negative encounters with humans. The sad reality is that some bears can't lose these

habits despite relocation and conflict mitigation efforts. In those cases, wildlife managers make the tough decision to kill them.

Fortunately, with proper steps taken other bears are able to avoid continued conflicts, and the agency removal morality statistic also includes occasional live removals where bears are relocated from the population. Still, the study also showed grizzlies dying from train and car collisions, humans acting in self-defense, illegal defense of property, and illegal hunting due to misidentification. Just 12 percent of adult bears were estimated to die from natural causes, with 17 percent undetermined.

While a high rate of human-caused death is the current reality for independent adult bears, it's less common for cubs. I spoke with Cecily Costello, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks' grizzly bear biologist for the NCDE and lead author of the 2004-2014 report. She explained that young bears often won't make it to adulthood due to natural causes, so for this age group, humans aren't the biggest risk.

Time of year is also a factor. Grizzlies are at greater risk in fall, when bears enter hyperphagia and must eat an enormous amount each day to prepare for hibernation. This means more movement and more conflicts with humans as they search for food. In one grim week this past October, six grizzlies in the NCDE were killed, contributing to 51 overall deaths in the ecosystem in 2019, following an identical record-setting 51 in 2018. Farther south the number was even higher, with the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee reporting a record 69 deaths in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem in 2019, 52 due to human causes.

## A SHIFTING PICTURE

Okay, we just processed a lot of numbers and a lot of thinking about dead bears, which nobody wants to do. So let's think about living bears: the good news is that the grizzly population has grown considerably in the Lower 48 in recent decades. So to an extent, we can expect to see mortalities rise simply because there are more bears.

This population growth also means that grizzlies are expanding out into more of their historical range, which often puts them into closer contact with people. Despite that risk, this geographic spread is crucial to reuniting currently-isolated grizzly bear populations. Having a large interconnected population south of Canada will promote genetic diversity and create resiliency within the species.

Costello explained that we're now seeing bears venture out of core protected areas that are mostly made up of federal and state lands with greater protections for grizzlies.

"In the long run we're hopeful that in those core areas we're not going to see a drastic change in human-caused mortality," Costello said, but added that life for a bear is inevitably more dangerous in more human-populated areas. "It only really stands to reason that those survival rates may not be as high as they would be in highly protected areas."

By promoting bear-aware communities and connecting core protected areas with conserved private lands, your support of Vital Ground is helping bears stay safer when they leave their wild strongholds. But the troubling statistics won't go away overnight.

## ARE WE DOING ENOUGH?

Grizzly bears were listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act in 1975, with about 350-400 bears in the NCDE. Through recovery efforts that population has now climbed to over 1,000 bears. And there's more good news: scientists are confident that mortality hasn't reached a level that would be detrimental to the NCDE population's survival.

With larger populations in Canada and Alaska, grizzlies as an overall species are doing all right. But is all right good enough? Grizzlies are a pillar of their ecosystems, impacting animals from insects to elk, and plants from wildflowers to trees. For humans, they've become a symbol of American wildlife even as we've confined them to just a small fraction of their former range. They're an integral part of our culture and the natural spaces many of us cherish. When we lose a grizzly we lose all of that, as well as the undefinable value of its own life.

Grizzlies deserve better. They deserve long, healthy lives and natural deaths, but at the moment barely one in 10 adult bears make it that far.

Costello added that there's hope for grizzly populations connecting between core zones. "We have plenty of examples of bears that are able to navigate a human-dominated landscape," she said. "So those bears that have learned how to live in harmony with the local community are the ones we have to lean on to make connectivity happen."

Thanks to conservationists like you and those remarkable bears, we're making progress toward a resilient grizzly population across the northwestern states, and toward communities that adapt to their presence. But there's clearly more work to do. 🐾

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*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](http://www.vitalground.org) to donate or become a member.

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Contact us at: (406) 549-8650 (Office)  
The Vital Ground Foundation info@vitalground.org  
20 Fort Missoula Road www.vitalground.org  
Missoula, MT 59804

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