

VITALNEWS

Lance Schelvan

ONE LANDSCAPE FOR WILDLIFE AND PEOPLE

A NEW PUSH FOR LAND, WATER AND BIODIVERSITY

From butterflies migrating north to bear cubs emerging from dens, spring brings movement and vitality. After a year that felt like one long winter to so many, the return of warmer months is especially invigorating in 2021. So, too, is another kind of movement: the growing international call for land, water and wildlife conservation.

In the United States, the Biden administration has joined the global “30 by 30” movement, pledging to conserve 30 percent of the U.S.’s land and water by 2030 (p. 6). Land trusts that protect private lands represent a crucial part of that effort, and as a Vital Ground supporter, you are helping lead the charge. The need is urgent, as a surging real estate market in the Northern Rockies has us working harder than ever. With recent conservation wins in the Yaak Valley (p. 3) and North Fork Flathead (p. 8), together we’re standing on behalf of all things wild.

Inside this issue:

| | |
|--|----|
| <i>Fowler Creek: Conservation Success in the Yaak Valley</i> | 3 |
| <i>Land Trusts and “30 by 30”</i> | 6 |
| <i>Habitat and Public Access Protected Near Glacier NP</i> | 8 |
| <i>Stewarding the Land with Help from New Technology</i> | 11 |
| <i>Grizzly 1017: A Young, Hungry Bear Crosses Vital Ground</i> | 14 |



VITAL GROUND
FOUNDATION

Great Support for Grizzlies—and Great Pressures

Thanks to unwavering support from people like you, the following pages will show that Vital Ground has maintained a healthy conservation pace in recent months, closing several key projects and backing more partners in pursuit of One Landscape for wildlife and people.

In related news, a recent survey by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the University of Montana illustrates that Vital Ground supporters are not alone in our appreciation of untrammelled places for grizzly bears and other wildlife. Published in December 2020, the study revealed that a significant majority of Montanans “agree or strongly agree” that:

- Grizzly bears are part of what makes Montana special (85 percent);
- They enjoy knowing grizzlies exist in Montana even if they never see one (81 percent);
- Grizzly bears are important for ecosystem health (80 percent);
- It is important to maintain a self-sustaining grizzly population in Montana (75 percent), and;
- Grizzly bears have a right to exist in the state (92 percent).

Further emphasizing the need for Vital Ground’s work were results illustrating solid support for the presence of bears and their roles in the ecosystem. But such acceptance is inversely related to human presence: A large majority of respondents (86 percent) stated that it is acceptable or very acceptable for grizzlies to live in primarily forested areas that are mostly publicly owned, while 65 percent of participants deemed it acceptable or very acceptable for grizzlies to live in areas with a mix of forest, open land, agricultural land and small towns. However, far fewer called it acceptable or very acceptable for grizzly bears to live in areas that are mostly agricultural with small towns (40 percent); in rural areas on the fringes of suburban developments (27 percent); and in suburban and urban residential areas (8 percent).

Aside from the remarkable breadth of support for the grizzly as part of Montana’s landscape, the results contain few surprises. But with real estate markets in the Rocky Mountain region among the most overheated in the country right now, it’s clear that grizzlies in the Lower 48 do not have an easy path ahead. With your help, we’ll do our best to match pace with these challenges.



Ryan Lutey, Executive Director

P.S. On a positive note—both for bears and Vital Ground’s newest business partner, UDAP Bear Spray (bearspray.com)—the survey documented that almost all Montanans (94 percent) report a willingness to carry bear spray while recreating or hunting, a critically important habit in balancing our coexistence!



RUGGED AND RESILIENT

HOW YOUR SUPPORT HELPED CONSERVE KEY HABITAT FOR YAAK VALLEY GRIZZLIES

Mich Doherty

Deep in the Yaak Valley of Montana's northwestern corner, Vital Ground and the Humane Society Wildlife Land Trust conserved 315 acres of rich, diverse habitat along Fowler Creek. An important movement area for grizzlies, elk, native fish and much more, the land will be protected from increased development pressures in the region.

By Matt Hart

Montana's Yaak Valley is one of the most remote places in the Lower 48. Folded into the state's northwestern corner, ringed by mountains and thick forest, it's several hours' drive to the nearest airport or shopping mall. Stand along the murmuring Yaak River in late-day sun and those asphalt-covered places seem a whole world away.

The Yaak is home to a broad suite of native wildlife—wolverine, grizzly bears, bull trout—and to those animals' benefit, the valley will remain a relative holdout from Montana's rampant housing market thanks in part to Vital Ground's latest conservation success. This spring, your support helped purchase 315 important acres at risk of subdivision and new development.

With major support for the project from the Humane Society Wildlife Land Trust (HSWLT), the new acquisition protects rich and diverse habitat along Fowler Creek, a tributary of the Yaak River.

Located near Vital Ground's Broadie Habitat Preserve, this lush bottomland will remain a crossroads for future generations of bears, native fish, elk and much more.

"Protecting crucial habitat and connectivity for grizzlies and other far-ranging wildlife is increasingly urgent," says Jim Reed, executive director of HSWLT. "The Humane Society Wildlife Land Trust is proud to help Vital Ground secure another substantial expanse of key habitat in Montana's Yaak Valley as a safe haven where grizzlies and wildlife will forever benefit from humane stewardship."

SLOW GAINS FOR GRIZZLIES

Along with the Cabinet Mountains to the south, the Yaak Valley and surrounding Purcell Range make up the Lower 48's smallest designated grizzly bear recovery zone. The Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem is really two populations, however, with an estimated 25-30 grizzlies in the Yaak and a similar number in the Cabinets. There is little documented movement

(continued on page 4)

(continued from page 3)

between the two and federal recovery goals call for roughly doubling the population size of each before they can be considered safe from extinction.

Vital Ground's Wild River project (see p. 12) has helped solidify a travel corridor between the Cabinets and the Yaak, but if the two small grizzly populations lose key core habitat there's little chance at improving connectivity between them. Fowler Creek is just that kind of habitat—within documented grizzly range, but both scenic and accessible enough to carry a high risk of development. Had these 315 acres been subdivided and developed into denser residential properties, the increased human presence would have posed a significant roadblock and conflict risk to grizzlies and other wide-ranging mammals while simultaneously damaging water quality and fish habitat in the Yaak watershed.

For a grizzly population as small as the Yaak's, where only a handful of females are of reproductive age at the same time, any new risk of conflict with people means a risk to the entire population. Lying along a stream corridor that helps connect the ecosystem's mountain strongholds, the Fowler Creek project provides a crucial piece in the Yaak's conservation tapestry.

"We have a native species on the landscape that we have reduced to exceedingly low population levels," says Wayne Kasworm, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist who has led grizzly recovery in the Cabinet-Yaak and neighboring Selkirk Ecosystem for several decades. "The Selkirk and Cabinet-Yaak areas are largely multiple-use environments. We don't have either of these areas anchored by a large national park or large expanses of wilderness, but bears need secure habitat that provides opportunities to move across



A remote camera has documented elk (above), moose, wolves, bears and many other species passing through Vital Ground's 215-acre Broodie Habitat Preserve, conserved in 2020 and located six miles from the new Fowler Creek project in Montana's Yaak Valley. The Fowler Creek acquisition protects 315 acres of diverse habitat.

the landscape without bumping into too many people along the way.”

ON THE PATH TO ONE LANDSCAPE

From the Yaak to central Montana’s Rocky Mountain Front Range, places like Fowler Creek represent the crux of Vital Ground’s effort to connect a single, regional landscape. With clean water, lush vegetation and easy travel beneath big mountains, these special areas attract both bears and humans for good reason.

But with Montana’s housing market currently ranked second nationally for growth, it’s vital for wildlife that the region’s remaining rural valleys retain pathways of open space. The One Landscape Initiative is Vital Ground’s urgent push to protect habitat connections in these threatened areas.

“Real estate markets throughout the Northern Rockies have never been under the kind of pressure they’re experiencing right now,” says Ryan Lutey, Vital Ground’s executive director. “You can bet that every acre of developable private land that is not already permanently protected for agriculture, open space or wildlife habitat is currently subject to some analysis of its highest and best use. That makes it extremely hard to compete against the speculative development pricing we’re seeing, but simultaneously increases the importance of every



Mitch Doherty

A bark peel shows evidence of bear traffic at the new Fowler Creek project site. Grizzlies and black bears peel tree bark to eat the rich cambium layer beneath.

acre protected.”

As a Vital Ground supporter, you make conserving these crucial places possible. Even if you live far from the free-flowing waters of Fowler Creek and the Yaak River, you can take pride knowing you’ve helped keep a uniquely wild place wild. 🐾

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Grizzly Blend logo art by Monte Dolack

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A NEW DAWN FOR CONSERVATION?

THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION PLEDGES TO MEET THE “30 BY 30” GOAL. LAND TRUSTS CAN HELP.

Protecting private lands for wildlife habitat, agriculture and recreation, land trusts have a crucial role to play in helping conserve 30 percent of U.S. land and waters by 2030.

By Tatum McConnell

With the passage of last year’s Great American Outdoors Act, conservation became a bigger part of the United States’ national conversation. Now it’s moving into uncharted territory, and with a catchy name: “30 by 30.”

Promising to protect 30 percent of U.S. land and water by 2030, the Biden administration has put forth what University of California Berkeley Environmental Science Professor Justin Brashares describes as “easily the boldest and largest commitment to conservation in U.S. history.” Just this month, the administration further detailed its goals in a report titled “Conserving and Restoring America the Beautiful.”

The road to 30 percent conservation isn’t an easy one, but it’s vital to maintaining biodiversity, carbon storage, and beautiful natural spaces for future generations. Alongside public land like national parks, forests and wildlife refuges, private lands—voluntarily conserved in partnership with

land trusts like Vital Ground—will be a crucial piece in this conservation puzzle.

WHY 30 BY 30?

While certainly snappy, the plan’s name is also scientifically backed. An important paper in the journal *Science Advances* put forth the 30 percent conservation number. The study amalgamated data from many ecosystem models to find that this level of conservation, combined with a sensible diet of renewable energy sources, would be enough to avoid a runaway climate change scenario.

Currently, 26 percent of American waters and 12 percent of land is conserved, so when it comes to our terrestrial ecosystems, we have a long way to go. For perspective, the remaining 18 percent of land is more than double the size of Texas. And it’s not just about quantity; we also need to consider what land is conserved. We do a better job conserving areas like high alpine mountains and deserts because they’re less easily developed by humans. By spreading out future conserved land

beyond traditionally-protected environments, the U.S. can make huge strides toward successful and long-lasting conservation.

PRIVATE LAND: CONSERVATION'S DARK HORSE

Privately-owned land makes up 60 percent of the U.S., but only 3 percent of it is protected for conservation. It's here that ecosystems are suffering the most: All that unprotected private land loses habitat for threatened and endangered species, like grizzly bears, at twice the rate of federal lands.

This is where land trusts like Vital Ground come in. While we periodically acquire land directly, voluntary conservation with landowners is the heart of private land conservation. The legal term for these agreements is easement: a partnership in which a landowner maintains ownership and the right to use and sell their land, but voluntarily gives the land trust certain development rights, typically preventing activities that would diminish the land's conservation values. In exchange, the landowner usually receives valuable tax deductions or partial monetary compensation.

Private land conservation can maintain important native fish and wildlife habitat, scenic and open space values, and the rural character of an area by preventing development. Conservation easements often take place on agricultural lands, such as Vital Ground's recent Hubbard Farm easement in Idaho's Kootenai Valley. When managed sustainably, these areas can provide both working lands and biodiversity strongholds. For many landowners, conservation easements provide a great opportunity to earn benefits for sustainable land management while retaining ownership.

The National Conservation Easement Database estimates that nearly 33 million acres are currently held in conservation easements in the U.S., and these numbers are on the rise. Protecting habitat on private lands will be a crucial way to make conservation strides in the U.S.

WILDLIFE AND PEOPLE WILL BENEFIT

Private land conservation can be highly strategic for protecting wildlife, offering a unique opportunity to conserve habitat corridors. Protecting these movement areas is increasingly recognized as a vital way to durably protect wildlife.

Federal land conservation often comes in large blocks, such as national forests and national parks. While these offer important safe havens for wildlife, animals like grizzly bears, elk and wolverine need to traverse a larger landscape. Conserved private lands can create a connected mosaic of protected areas that allow animals to move on a broad scale.

Like all conserved lands, protected private lands also help secure a stable climate future by storing carbon. All living materials contain carbon, and when we cut down trees or replace natural areas with developed ones that carbon is eventually released, adding to global greenhouse gas emissions. Conserved land helps tackle both of the intertwined environmental crises the Earth faces—biodiversity loss and climate change.

For both wildlife and people's sake, Vital Ground's One Landscape Initiative carefully selects the locations of our projects to best support healthy ecosystems. We prioritize connecting grizzly bear protection areas and building links between fragmented populations. With grizzly bears traversing all parts of a landscape, from high mountains to low valleys, these areas provide protected land for countless other species while also maintaining an area's open, rural character.

As the U.S. forges ahead into this bold future for conservation, land trusts like Vital Ground will be an important force in reaching the 30 percent goal. Private lands offer an incredible opportunity to protect and connect large areas of our landscape. Incorporating science, connected ecosystems, and local perspectives, Vital Ground, with supporters like you, will help make some of the biggest impacts on conservation the U.S. has ever seen. 🐾

SAVING THE GATEWAY

THE NORTH FORK FLATHEAD VALLEY LIES JUST OUTSIDE GLACIER NATIONAL PARK. WILL IT SOON BE FILLED WITH HOUSES?

Kevin Rhoades

Lying across the North Fork of the Flathead River from Glacier National Park, the North Fork Valley serves as an important wildlife corridor connecting Glacier with the Whitefish Mountains to the west. With the valley under increased pressure from new development, Vital Ground and the U.S. Forest Service are partnering to save open space and habitat.

By Matt Hart

Before the pandemic, 2019 saw Glacier National Park host more than 3 million visitors. In 2020, Montana's housing market surged, ranking second nationally behind Utah for growth.

Combine these pressures—tourism and new real estate development—and the region's rural character and wildlife can quickly lose out. As valleys fill and recreation hotspots clog, the pace and impact of human activity intensifies and animals are forced to move and adapt.

It adds up to an urgent need to conserve the right pieces of land: keystone corridors, often across valley bottoms that link mountain strongholds, the channels that give wildlife the chance to continue moving around the landscape while also spacing out development in and around rural communities.

Vital Ground and the Flathead National Forest helped solidify just such a corridor this spring with the purchase of 10 acres bordering public lands along the North Fork of the Flathead River

near Polebridge. Utilizing the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), the Glacier Gateway project maintains public access to one of the national park system's crown jewels while also protecting an important habitat connection for grizzly bears, elk, wolverine and other wildlife.

Backed by supporters like you—as well as Tourism Cares and the Whitefish Community Foundation—Vital Ground provided administrative and financial support for the Forest Service's purchase of the land through LWCF. The national conservation fund directs royalties from offshore drilling toward community conservation efforts ranging from municipal parks to fishing access sites. Last year, LWCF received bipartisan support and permanent funding from Congress as part of the Great American Outdoors Act.

"We are fortunate to have partnered with Vital Ground on this conservation acquisition in an area of such high ecological importance," says the Forest

Service's Hungry Horse and Glacier View District Ranger, Rob Davies. "It is a privilege to be able to manage this land for wildlife benefit, Wild and Scenic River values and public use for generations to come."

Vital Ground has completed several habitat projects in the North Fork Valley in recent years, helping limit subdivision and dense development in a popular tourist area that also serves as a crucial habitat corridor between Glacier's Livingston Range and the Whitefish Mountains to the west.

In the Glacier Gateway project, wildlife interests combined with the call to maintain public access in the North Fork. Whether from Billings, Boston or Great Britain, visitors stream through the Polebridge area during the warmer months to hike, float, fish, view wildlife or savor a huckleberry bear claw from the Polebridge Mercantile. With the housing market portending denser subdivision and development, 10-acre projects like Glacier Gateway can have outsize impact, keeping channels into the mountains open for people and wildlife alike.

Meanwhile, waterway protections for the river itself—such as its National Wild and Scenic designation and the North Fork Watershed Protection Act of 2014—combine with a growing patchwork of land conservation to maintain the

area's unique wild character.

"The Glacier Gateway project is an outstanding opportunity for collaborative conservation that benefits both people and wildlife," says Mitch Doherty, Vital Ground's conservation director. "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."

Habitat connections in the North Fork don't just keep wildlife moving between the Livingston and Whitefish ranges. They combine with other key corridors across the region to promise a future in which bears, wolverine, Canada lynx and countless other species can move more freely on the land.

Vital Ground's One Landscape Initiative pursues conservation in these essential linkage points, from southwestern Montana to northern Idaho. With development pressures higher than ever, your support is saving crucial acres while also funding community coexistence efforts, everything from range riders and electric fencing for livestock to safe sanitation and bear spray education. By providing both land connections and the tools for conflict prevention, One Landscape enables a more stable future for all who call the region home. 🐾



YOUNG LIVING
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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.

Since the establishment of its first farm, Young Living is dedicated to protecting plants, wildlife, and natural habitats. Known for its unique Seed to Seal® process, Young Living Essen-

tial Oils ensures its seeds are planted in soil free from chemicals or harmful pesticides.

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

SUPPORTER SPOTLIGHT

Celebrating Vital Ground's Creative Partners!

As a *Vital News* reader, you've probably heard about our conservation partners, the communities and nonprofits we team up with to prevent conflicts between bears and people and promote coexistence with wildlife. You also probably know about our business partners like Kodiak Cakes and Montana Coffee Traders, as well as the conservation-minded landowner partners who make so many of our habitat protection projects possible.

Those aren't the only partnerships that keep Vital Ground moving forward, however. Through our three decades of conservation work, we've been lucky to join forces with many inspiring artists as creative partners. Whether they're donating wildlife photography for use in print and online publications or offering a painting for auction at a Vital Ground fundraiser, these creators share your passion for wildlife and their in-kind contributions to Vital Ground lead to conservation on the ground the same way your generous support does. We couldn't do it without any of you!

One of Vital Ground's newest creative partners is Missoula-based artist **Claire Emery**, who creates handmade woodcuts of nature inspired by Montana's geography. Claire's artistic process begins in the field, her outdoor studio, where she investigates the genius of nature through careful observation, sketches and writing. A typical field entry includes questions, reflections and lively drawings at multiple scales. Together, these become the springboard for more directed work in her indoor studio, where she continues by consulting books, experts, scientists, poets and the Internet to develop stunning woodblock prints.

"Nothing about my process is fast," she says.

"Creating a woodblock print is a very old and beautiful process. Once I transfer the story I want to tell onto wood, I carve lines, patterns and textures using V- and U-shaped gouges to create an image. When the carving is complete, I roll very fine layers of ink onto the wood. Then, my 1982 Takach Etching Press transfers the ink from the wood to special handmade cotton paper. Once the ink is dry, I hand-color each print using multiple glazes of color until it sings."

After Claire signs and numbers the limited edition run of prints, she sends them out into the world to lovers of fine craft, nature and



Claire Emery's woodcuts begin with careful observation of the natural world.

conservation. You can learn more about Claire and her work at emeryart.com and on Instagram at [instagram.com/woodcutclaire](https://www.instagram.com/woodcutclaire). You can learn about other Vital Ground creative partners on the updated section of our website: vitalground.org/partners. Currently featured online in addition to Claire are photographers **Larry Aumiller** and **Lance Schelvan**, with more to come! 🐾

Remote Monitoring: A New Helper in Land Stewardship

By Kali Becher, Land Steward

Can new technology help advance conservation in the digital age? In any field, technological advances often help increase efficiency, but can they also increase effectiveness in the field of conservation, where there is often little substitute for on-the-ground understanding of a piece of land?

Vital Ground is excited to be part of a program to better answer this question as one of two dozen land trusts selected for a new remote monitoring program led by the Land Trust Alliance and The Nature Conservancy in California.

What exactly is remote monitoring, and how will Vital Ground use it? Remote monitoring is any method of observing a property from the air—whether from a plane or satellite—as opposed to in person on the ground. The focus of our remote monitoring pilot project will be to harness the power of high-resolution aerial satellite imagery

and incorporate it with our usual on-the-ground observations in order to benefit the health of the habitat areas we steward.

In nature, as in life, new perspectives offer fresh insights to our work and our goal is to increase our understanding of the lands we help protect through the use of this technology. We will also use remote monitoring to measure the effects of our land management projects, such as tracking changes in plant growth or measuring surface water area before and after restoring a wetland. One example is Bismark Meadows in northern Idaho (pictured below), where we are using imitation beaver dams to restore wetlands. The site's rural location five hours from Missoula means remote monitoring will greatly increase our ability to regularly check in on the progress of restoration.

To begin the pilot program, we will team with our friends at Kaniksu Land Trust and the Idaho Department of Lands to monitor conserved lands in our overlapping service areas of northern Idaho and northwestern Montana. This rugged landscape is complex and we can always learn more about how best to protect and restore these lands that are so important to wildlife and people. 🐾



High-resolution aerial imagery will assist stewardship of our habitat areas, especially remote sites like Bismark Meadows in northern Idaho, five hours' drive from Missoula.

Vital Ground Welcomes Two New Trustees!

Vital Ground's board of trustees is the talented, disciplined and passionate force behind our work for wildlife. Spanning the professional and geographic spectrum, these dedicated conservationists turn your support into our organizational vision, goals and plans. We're excited to welcome two new trustees in 2021!

A Colorado native, **Scott Birmingham's**



Scott Birmingham

passion for grizzly bears was sparked by the death of the last known grizzly in the state in 1979, long after they were believed to be locally extinct. He regrets that there has never been a serious grizzly reintroduction effort in Colorado, but is passionate about

conserving the places where they live elsewhere. Scott is committed to the cause of Vital Ground and other conservation efforts to ensure a better future for grizzlies, especially in unprotected areas crucial to their survival.

Scott has 34 years of experience working in manufacturing, including the past 12 years as CEO of a catalyst technology business in Colorado focused on polymerization and a variety of other disciplines such as electronic materials. Prior to that, he worked several years for the federal government, mainly in mineral resource evaluation of federal lands. He is a graduate of Colorado State University and the University of Texas at Austin.

Matt Dusek is a self-described noodler, tinkerer, wanderer, and daydreamer. He believes deeply in the power of collaborative imagination. Matt joined the online game platform and game creation system Roblox as the first hire, helping build it for more than



Matt Dusek

a decade into a global sensation. His academic background is in analytic philosophy, with a focus on epistemology and philosophy of mind. A lifelong lover of wildlife and wild places, Matt grew up on *Wild America* and other nature shows—*The Man Who Loved Bears* was on endless repeat—and had his imagination irretrievably captivated by mountain wildernesses while visiting the western national parks with his grandparents over the course of several summers.

In 2013, Matt began researching how to effectively establish linkage corridors between disconnected grizzly bear populations. In the process, he learned of Vital Ground's history of accomplishing that very thing and became a supporter. One of Matt's great joys in life is the pursuit of bold ambitions with inspiring people, and he believes Vital Ground offers that in spades. Matt is joined in his enthusiastic support of Vital Ground by his wife, biologist Rachel Dusek.

Vital Ground and Y2Y Conserve Additional Acres at Wild River

Sometimes conservation work must be slow and steady, and for the last decade, your support has made that kind of progress possible in the crucial Wild River corridor of northwestern Montana. In partnership with the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y), last December's

purchase and protection of an additional lot brings the Wild River project's total impact to more than 125 contiguous acres conserved.

Located near the confluence of the Yaak and Kootenai rivers, the site represents a natural bottleneck for wildlife moving across the valley. The Kootenai River splits the Cabinet and Purcell mountain ranges, each of which is home to a small population of grizzly bears as well as Canada lynx, wolverine and many other sensitive species.

"This is a big deal because it helps bolster the recovery of grizzly bears in Northwest Montana," says Jessie Grossman, program coordinator for Y2Y. "It provides a stepping stone for them to reconnect with neighboring populations, which is critical for their long-term survival. Biologists believe this project helps reconnect fragmented grizzly populations between the Yellowstone area and the Canadian border, so this matters for grizzly bear health on an international scale."

The Kootenai Valley splits the Cabinet-Yaak ecosystem's grizzlies into two largely-isolated subgroups estimated at just 25-30 bears each. By protecting habitat along the valley floor, the Wild River project advances the long-term goal of reconnecting these grizzlies, which are threatened by continued habitat fragmentation and ongoing encroachment into their remaining wild landscapes.

"It gives the opportunity for a linkage from the Yaak to the Cabinets," says Wayne Kasworm, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist who has led grizzly recovery in the Cabinet-Yaak since 1983. "Not only did we identify that this was an area where we'd expect grizzlies to cross because of the habitat, but we have actually identified one grizzly bear that crossed on the perimeter of this property getting from the Cabinets to the Yaak."

Numerous other species will benefit, from moose and elk to the Kootenai River's native fish, including an endangered population of white sturgeon. Vital Ground is partnering with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks to improve rearing habitat for sturgeon in and along the river.

"Locals know this spot as important wintering grounds for elk," says Grossman. "It's not only a benefit to endangered species, but also to a variety of wildlife valued by Montanans for activities like hunting that sustain our rural way of life."

Major support for the Wild River project came from the Cinnabar Foundation; Cross Charitable Foundation; Max and Victoria Dreyfus Foundation; First Interstate Bank Foundation; Thornton S. Glide, Jr. and Katrina D. Glide Foundation; Montana Coffee Traders; Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks; the Pleiades Foundation; Weeden Foundation and individual contributors like you. 🐾



A HUNGRY BEAR ON VITAL GROUND

THE STORY OF GRIZZLY 1017 SHOWS THE CHALLENGES BEARS FACE ON TODAY'S LANDSCAPE

By Tatum McConnell

Last November, Vital Ground received one of our favorite kinds of email: news of wildlife utilizing the habitat our supporters help protect. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Wayne Kasworm confirmed that a grizzly bear with the research number 1017 had recently come through one of our conservation areas in Idaho's northern panhandle. The bear's story, it turns out, offers a fascinating example of some of the challenges grizzlies face on our modern landscapes.

Kasworm explained that while out on a research flight to look for grizzly bears via radio telemetry, he noticed the special signal for an inactive collar on one of Vital Ground's properties along the eastern edge of the Selkirk Mountains. Researchers like Kasworm use radio collars to collect information on grizzly populations. In the Selkirk Mountains that span the Idaho-British Columbia border, this is especially important, as the grizzly population there numbers around 75 individuals according to Kasworm, putting it at risk of decline due to lack of genetic diversity.

Thanks to work from wildlife managers,

conservation organizations and communities, the Selkirk grizzly population is now increasing at a rate of two percent each year, according to Kasworm. To put this in context, one of the highest annual grizzly population growth rates comes out of the Greater Yellowstone area, topping off at about five percent. Due to grizzlies' long gestation periods and small litter sizes, growing a grizzly population is slow but steady work, and so is studying it.

"We collar bears in the area to try to get an idea of mortality rates and causes, survival rates, and for females, reproductive rates," Kasworm explained. These factors allow him to understand population trends for the area, and learn what particular bears like 1017 are up to.

GRIZZLY 1017: A MODERN BEAR

So how do you safely get a collar on a bear in order to track its movement? Using leg snares, specifically designed to prevent trapping cubs, a grizzly can be caught with minimal harm. A trap will use a radio signal to notify biologists that it has been triggered, and they're checked frequently to ensure no animals are stuck for too long.

Once they arrive at the trap, biologists tranquilize the bear, take data such as weight, size and overall health, and put a collar on that can transmit radio data. While it's certainly not a bear's best day, these data collection efforts are designed to be minimally invasive and give scientists the information they need to help the overall population. Collars include a canvas spacer that wears out after 1-3 years so bears aren't stuck with them forever. Since bears change in size so much from spring to fall, the collars allow plenty of room for growth and can sometimes slip off on their own.

That turned out to be the case for Grizzly 1017. Looking back on the data, Kasworm could see that his team had put a collar on this 4-year old male last spring, just south of the Canadian border where the Selkirk foothills meet the wide Kootenai River Valley. From there, 1017 crossed into British Columbia and gorged himself on a controversial grizzly food source: freshly grown corn.

Unfortunately, corn is a common choice for bears that range near farmland. In wide fertile valleys at the base of mountain ranges, like the Kootenai in Idaho or Montana's Mission Valley, cornfields become irresistible bear buffets. As omnivores and scavengers, it's hard to dissuade a hungry bear from taking advantage of an easy food source, but groups like Vital Ground's partner People and Carnivores are working on it.

On the farm 1017 visited, Kasworm observed four collared grizzlies eating corn last summer. At some point, however, 1017 got tired of corn for breakfast, lunch and dinner—or got forced out by another bear—and headed south. Led once again by his nose and appetite, 1017 found another food source tied to agricultural production in the valley. This time, he discovered a decomposing cow in a farm's drainage ditch bordering a piece of Vital Ground habitat on the edge of the Selkirk foothills. Kasworm expects that while rooting around in the remains of the cow, 1017's collar got caught and the canvas spacer tore off.

RECONNECTING GRIZZLY POPULATIONS

This is where we leave 1017, as his collarless travels have returned to anonymity. But the story doesn't end there: Once a collar drops, bear managers will go to pretty extreme lengths to collect it. After spotting 1017's signal, Kasworm drove to the area expecting to find the collar somewhere in a nearby field. Instead, he found it was buried in mud, ditchwater and bits of decomposing cow. With more than 30 years of seniority to his name, Kasworm decided to pull rank.

"Seeing the situation, I made an executive decision to send the people who work for me in to get it," he joked. With chest-waders and nets in hand, the team got down and dirty, literally, to find the collar and the remaining data on 1017.

While they aren't all tracked by Kasworm, bears have stories similar to 1017's across the Selkirks and their neighboring ecosystem to the east, the Cabinet-Yaak. These two small recovery zones, each with well under 100 grizzlies, have been historically divided by the Kootenai Valley that splits the Selkirk, Cabinet and Purcell mountain ranges. According to Kasworm, however, grizzlies are now moving between the ranges more often, with a few bears moving from the Purcells west into the Selkirks, several moving in the opposite direction, and one moving north from the Cabinets into the Purcells across Vital Ground's Wild River property.

"Seeing bears move is all well and good but what we ultimately want to see is bears moving and reproducing," Kasworm cautioned. "Movement alone is not the entire picture. We want to see gene flow and gene flow is represented by reproduction."

As 1017's story shows, the lure of easy, human-related foods makes moving from one wild area to another far from straightforward. It will take a broad team effort of focused habitat protection and robust conflict prevention for these grizzly populations to connect and thrive. As a Vital Ground supporter, you are part of that team, helping achieve a more stable future for bears like 1017. 🐾

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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 to donate or become a member.

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