THE VITAL GROUND FOUNDATION | SPRING 2023

VITAL NEWS

Robert Scriba

ONE LANDSCAPE FOR WILDLIFE AND PEOPLE

WELCOMING BEARS BACK TO A MORE OPEN LANDSCAPE

With snow in the mountains and rain in the valleys, April brought plenty of showers to grizzly country this year. May flowers have followed as promised, drawing mother bears and newborn cubs out of their dens to look for the first plant foods of the season. Across the region, average or above-average snowfall totals promise ample forage in the months to come.

Thanks to supporters like you, these bears and many other species will keep moving freely through crucial places this year and for generations to come. New conservation easements with landowner partners in the Swan and Tobacco River valleys of western Montana ensure that key habitat linkages will not be subdivided or over-developed amid the region's ongoing real estate rush. And in the wet and wild Yaak Valley, you can help protect more acres of vital bottomland habitat for one of the Lower 48's smallest grizzly populations. Read about these projects and much more on the following pages, and thanks as always for supporting wildlife!

Inside this issue:

Support needed to expand key Yaak Valley habitat corridor 3

Grave Creek conservation easement protects land link west of Glacier NP 4

Habitat connection and rare forested wetland conserved in Swan Valley 6

In memory: Jim and Norma Fosgate 8

How you can help bring grizzly bears back to the North Cascades 10

Following their footsteps: Indigenous peoples' kinship with bears 14

VITAL GROUND FOUNDATION

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S CORNER

A Spring Full of Movement, for Grizzlies and Vital Ground

The resilience of the grizzly bear as a species depends on movement—ranging far and wide to find forage and meet other habitat needs, relocating away from disturbances to adequately secure spaces, and pursuing connections with other individuals within the species' communities. This year, the arrival of spring finds both the region's grizzlies and Vital Ground on the move!

Now that they've left winter dens, grizzly cubs are on the move, following their mothers through the warmer months as they learn the skills of survival on a changing landscape.

For bears, motion began with the annual emergence from winter dens. More figuratively, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service renewed preliminary studies of the potential to relocate experimental grizzly populations to vast stretches of unoccupied habitat in the North Cascades (p. 10) and Bitterroot ecosystems. While the North Cascades movement follows several stops and starts in the last decade, the Bitterroot change has no recent precedent; in March, a federal judge ruled that a plan to reintroduce grizzly bears into the Bitterroot Mountains of southwestern Montana and central Idaho must be actively reconsidered after it was stalled for 22 years.

For Vital Ground, the movement is miniscule compared to the grizzly's. After 18 years inhabiting Fort Missoula's Heritage Hall, we're making a short hop across the former fort's campus to more suitable habitat (p. 12) that will accommodate the organization's growth and continued pursuit of our One Landscape vision.

In 2005, Vital Ground's board of trustees backed the decision to relocate headquarters from Park City, Utah to Missoula, Mont., right into the heart of the Northern Rockies' grizzly bear country. That move made all the difference in helping us mirror the Great Bear's presence on the landscape, allowing Vital Ground to thrive as an organization while filling a substantial niche in the larger conservation ecosystem we call home.

As a Vital Ground contributor, you are a player in that conservation community. Even though our members are dispersed across the nation and beyond, your support for wildlife passes right through Missoula on its way out to the landscapes of grizzly country. We hope you might do the same—stop in and visit us in our new home soon!

Warm wishes,

Ryan Lutey, Executive Director

PROJECT UPDATE

WET AND WILD

WITH YOUR HELP, VITAL GROUND IS CLOSE TO EXPANDING A CRUCIAL CONSERVATION CORRIDOR

Randy Beacham

The Fowler Creek Project in northwestern Montana's Yaak Valley conserves rich lowland habitat where grizzlies, moose, wolves, elk and much more traverse the valley bottom between mountain strongholds. With development pressures high in the area, the next phase of this project is moving rapidly forward, but additional support is still needed.

By Matt Hart

In *The Book of Yaak*, Montana author Rick Bass describes the Yaak Valley, where he lives, as "a kind of church ... A place with the residue of God—the scent, feel, sight, taste, and sound of God—forever fresh upon it."

Whether or not you relate to special places like the Yaak on spiritual levels, as a Vital Ground supporter you've likely read stories and seen photos of this valley before. Tucked into one of the most remote folds of the Lower 48, the Yaak winds between the surrounding Purcell Mountains that descend from Canada. At the southern toe of the continent's only inland temperate rainforest, the cedar-lined drainages that feed the Yaak River are home to nearly every wildlife species that lived in this part of the country 200 years ago, from elusive pine martens to rare hummingbirds to a small, persistent grizzly population.

But it could all change very quickly.

Not spared from the real estate rush happening across Montana and Idaho, subdivision and dense development is picking up in pockets of the Yaak. For the area's wildlife to remain diverse, habitat connections across the valley bottom must remain open. Vital Ground—with major support from landowner partners, the Wildlife Land Trust and individual contributors like you—is already leading the way. Over the last five years, our Broadie Habitat Preserve and Fowler Creek projects have protected nearly 700 acres of rich bottomlands, but there's much more to do.

First up: conserving 64 additional acres adjacent to the previously-protected Fowler Creek site. The Fowler Creek West land purchase will expand and connect the conservation footprint in this part of the valley, with public land and other protected private lands bordering the forested property. These bottomlands are heavily used by wildlife, with trail cameras at the nearby Fowler Creek and Broadie properties logging everything from cougars and black bears to elk, deer, wolves and grizzlies.

The Yaak's grizzly bear population remains one of North America's smallest, with an estimated 25-30 bears enduring and little genetic exchange documented with neighboring populations in Montana, Idaho and Canada.

For these persistent grizzlies—and the Yaak's entire congregation of native species—to keep living open, wild lives for generations to come, we must keep protecting crucial acres now. You can support the Fowler Creek West project by clicking the Sponsor An Acre button at ***vitalground.org/how-you-can-help***.

NEW ACRES CONSERVED

LINKING THE WAY WEST FROM GLACIER

VITAL GROUND AND LANDOWNER PARTNERS CONSERVE A KEY MONTANA HABITAT CORRIDOR

With its iconic jagged peaks and teal mountain lakes, Glacier National Park is an international travel destination. But the landscapes just outside the park are no less wild or rich with biodiversity.

Boasting its own rugged peaks, alpine lakes and iconic array of species, the Whitefish Range (pictured above) is a wandering bear or wolf's first habitat stronghold west of the national park. An animal that keeps moving west from these peaks, however, ventures into a more complex patchwork of land uses.

Thanks to conservation-minded landowners and supporters like you, a rich corridor of wetlands, meadows and forest on the west side of the Whitefish Range is now protected in perpetuity. The acres in the Grave Creek drainage will remain open for grizzly bears, Canada lynx, native trout and numerous other sensitive species after Vital Ground partnered with landowners Greg and Lisa Levine earlier this year to complete a conservation easement on their property near Eureka, Mont.

The 28-acre agreement maintains an important habitat connection for wildlife moving between the Whitefish Range and the Cabinet-Yaak area in Montana's northwestern corner. With development pressures high across the region, the easement will prevent subdivision on the property and limit negative human impacts for generations to come.

"We are grateful to Vital Ground for providing us this opportunity to protect grizzlies in Northwest Montana," Greg and Lisa said. "We are avid animal lovers and are honored to be a part of conservation efforts to safeguard their habitat and help ensure a viable grizzly population. Rest assured, grizzlies will always be protected and respected on our land. Our wish is for more landowners to follow and create more safe havens for these beautiful creatures."

A VITAL LINK FOR GRIZZLIES

The project area's lush habitat will benefit a host of native species, from moose, elk, wolves and wolverine to wetland plants, birds and fish. With the site bordering Flathead National Forest lands, preventing subdivision and further development of the acres carries special importance for the grizzly bears that regularly move through the drainage.

To the east of the project area, the Whitefish Range marks the edge of the Northern Continental Divide

Ecosystem (NCDE), home to Glacier National Park, the Bob Marshall Wilderness and an estimated 1,100 grizzlies. Farther west, the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem is home to around 50 grizzly bears, with the area's habitat cores much smaller than the NCDE's and connection to other bear populations restricted by highways and other human activity.

Protecting open movement corridors like the Grave Creek project site maintains the potential for increased movement by bears from the recovering NCDE population to the Cabinet-Yaak. These natural migrations are crucial to improving the genetic diversity and long-term survival of the Cabinet-Yaak grizzly population.

"Genetic diversity and interchange of genetics in this population is a lot more important because of its small size," said Wayne Kasworm, a biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service who leads the Cabinet-Yaak grizzly recovery effort. "We have not seen interchange of that nature from the NCDE to the Cabinet-Yaak. We have seen a couple bears move but many of those bears died before they could reproduce."

KEEPING OPEN SPACE OPEN

Under the new conservation easement, the project site will remain in the Levines' private ownership, with development confined to a pocket of the property containing a residence and several small outbuildings. The remainder of the acreage will be stewarded as wildlife habitat, including a large meadow, two ponds and a perennial stream.

Part of the Tobacco River Valley that extends south from the Canadian border, the property is located roughly 40 miles from the fast-growing tourism hub of Whitefish. Conserving open space in these areas that could soon be at risk of dense development ensures not just habitat connectivity for wildlife but also a continued rural, scenic landscape for future generations of people to enjoy.

That combination of benefits for grizzlies, other wildlife and people made the Grave Creek project a high priority for Vital Ground's One Landscape Initiative, our conservation strategy aimed at protecting key private lands that link wild strongholds across the Northern Rockies region.

"The One Landscape conservation strategy was crafted with guidance from biologists and bear managers who pointed out that areas such as Grave Creek are important for natural east-west bear movement between the NCDE and the Cabinet-Yaak," said Mitch Doherty, Conservation Director for Vital Ground. "Voluntary, private land conservation efforts by families like the Levines will ensure bears and other wildlife have secure habitat as they move across the landscape."

The Grave Creek project would not have been possible without support from the PDJ Family Foundation, Whitefish Community Foundation, Weeden Foundation, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and individual donors like you. Thank you for helping protect this key habitat!

Trail camera footage provided by the landowners shows a grizzly bear crossing the Grave Creek project site. Now protected in perpetuity with a conservation easement, this important habitat link helps connect the Whitefish Range bordering Glacier National Park with other wildlands farther west in Montana, including the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem and its small grizzly population.

GROWING THE FOOTPRINT

THANKS TO NEW PARTNERS, ANOTHER KEY HABITAT LINK IS CONSERVED IN THE SWAN VALLEY

The Swan Valley in western Montana is home to Vital Ground's first conservation easements, completed nearly 20 years ago. Much has changed in Montana, but the scenic and biodiverse valley's importance to regional conservation remains as high today as it was then.

Sustained by supporters like you, Vital Ground remains an active contributor to the Swan's still-growing conservation footprint. And thanks to new landowner and nonprofit partners, a sizeable wetland in the heart of the valley's habitat corridor will remain open for grizzlies and many other wildlife species after Vital Ground completed a conservation agreement in the Salmon Prairie area near Condon, Mont.

Working with conservation-minded landowners, Vital Ground collaborated with Montana Freshwater Partners—a restoration-focused nonprofit formerly called Montana Aquatic Resources Services—in support of the 30-acre conservation easement. The land will remain in private ownership with a new habitat restoration plan for portions of the wetland previously converted for agriculture. With the property bordering public lands and other protected private lands, the project ensures that rare forested wetlands will remain undeveloped within the habitat corridor linking the Mission and Swan mountains.

"We are thrilled to partner with Vital Ground and the landowners to protect this unique property," said Leah Swartz, project manager for Montana Freshwater Partners. "Forested wetlands can take hundreds of years to develop on the landscape, so protecting those that remain intact is a priority."

BOLSTERING BIODIVERSITY

Located roughly five miles from another Vital Ground conservation easement along Condon Creek, the Salmon Prairie project adds to the Swan Valley's impressive network of protected private lands that link wildland strongholds on either side of the valley. What makes the Salmon Prairie property unique are the rich wetlands that cover the majority of the acreage.

Grizzly bears rely on the Swan Valley's moist bottomlands for seasonal range, with spring plant foods present earlier than at higher elevations. The lush habitat also draws moose, elk and deer and lies within the documented range of rarer species, including wolverine and Canada lynx. As part of the Swan River watershed, the Salmon Prairie wetlands maintain water quantity and quality in a key habitat area for native bull trout, a federally-designated threatened species, and Westslope cutthroat trout, a designated sensitive species in Montana.

"The landowners' game cameras have captured just about every species you could imagine using their property, from great gray owls to mountain lions and grizzly bears," said Swartz.

PARTNERING TO PROTECT

Under the new easement, the acreage will be protected in perpetuity from development outside of a small corner where the landowners live. Working with Montana Freshwater Partners, the landowners will undertake habitat restoration efforts to improve species diversity, natural water storage and wildlife habitat in parts of the property once converted for agriculture.

Located within the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem—home to the Lower 48's largest grizzly bear population at roughly 1,100 animals—the Swan Valley has a long tradition of protecting and stewarding private lands that help link the region's wild expanses. As development pressures build across Montana, voluntary conservation partnerships with landowners are crucial to balancing the needs of wildlife and people.

"The Swan Valley is a conservation success story," said Mitch Doherty, conservation director for Vital Ground. "Projects like this show how landowners are voluntarily protecting biodiversity for generations to come. The culmination of their conservation efforts, large and small, are how we protect this jewel in the southwestern portion of the Crown of the Continent region."

A federally-designated threatened species, the bull trout finds the cool waters it needs to thrive in the upper reaches of the Swan River watershed, where Vital Ground and Montana Freshwater Partners recently joined forces with conservation-minded landowners to conserve a key wetland that helps maintain the area's water storage.

With more than a dozen projects completed in the Swan over the last 20 years, Vital Ground continues to play a major role in the valley's conservation future while also working in areas farther from the grizzly's current habitat cores to reconnect the species' historic range. Building off the Swan Valley's model for private land conservation, Vital Ground's One Landscape Initiative envisions a safer shared landscape for wildlife and people across the Northern Rockies.

In the Swan and beyond, diverse partnerships and supporters like you make these wins for wildlife possible. We couldn't do it without you!

Remembering Conservation Champions Jim and Norma Fosgate

By Matt Hart

"They were some of the finest people we have ever known," says Vital Ground trustee and co-founder Lynne Seus of Jim and Norma Fosgate. Passionate supporters of wildlife conservation and pioneering spirits throughout their lives, the Fosgates passed away within two months of one another over the winter.

If the name Fosgate catches your ear, it's no mistake. From his childhood in Indiana on, Jim (1937-2022) lived a life spent searching for the perfect sound. The son of a nurse and a radio and television repairman, Jim built a portable radio from scavenged parts as a teenager and installed it on his bicycle. In 1973, his passion for sound and technology became his legacy with the invention of the Fosgate Punch EQ, the world's first car amplifier.

The Rockford Fosgate brand grew from that first creation and remains synonymous with car stereos worldwide. But Jim, known by many as "Foz," was far from finished with invention. He later played a leading role in the development of surround sound technology, a breakthrough that earned him the ultimate prize in his field, a 2003 Emmy Award for his achievement and contributions in the development of surround sound for television. "He was a genius of a man," says Lynne.

According to Jim's obituary, in 1978 he was working on a project in Prescott, Ariz., when a neighbor knocked on his door to inquire about the loud music constantly playing. Norma (1936-2023) was studying music therapy for autistic children at the time and the two immediately bonded, marrying in 1981 and living out four decades together as self-described soulmates.

Norma's passions for philosophy and mysticism carried her through numerous jobs, including working with Navajo painter, healer and shaman David Paladin. Raised

Norma and Jim Fosgate share a lighthearted moment with Vital Ground grizzly ambassador Bart the Bear II in Heber City, Utah. Ardent conservation supporters and close friends of Vital Ground co-founders Doug and Lynne Seus, the Fosgates both joined Bart in greener pastures over the winter. *(Note: Bart the Bear II was a trained animal actor adopted and cared for by the Seuses after he was orphaned as an infant cub. As such, Bart's interactions with humans do not reflect proper safety measures for encounters with wild bears.)*

in Salt Lake City, she was "striking, determined, resilient" and "always singing, dancing, and sharing her joy," according to her obituary.

With four children from Norma's previous marriage, the Fosgates served as beloved matriarch and patriarch for a family now that now extends to seven grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren. The family seat became Jim and Norma's homestead in Heber City, Utah, where they met and befriended Vital Ground co-founders Doug and Lynne Seus, as well as grizzly ambassadors Bart, Bart II, Honey Bump and Tank.

Sharing a love for animals and the beyond-human world, the Seuses and Fosgates became fast friends and Jim and Norma became "great friends of Vital Ground," according to Lynne. With a dozen years of giving to habitat protection, the Fosgates leave behind a tangible conservation legacy.

"Jim and Norma were incredibly generous and supportive to Vital Ground during our early years as a land trust," says Executive Director Ryan Lutey. "I remember talking to Jim at a reception about everything from grizzly bear recovery to how my friends and I all wanted Rockford Fosgate speakers worth twice what our cars were worth in high school. Jim and Norma will be sorely missed and very fondly remembered in our conservation community."

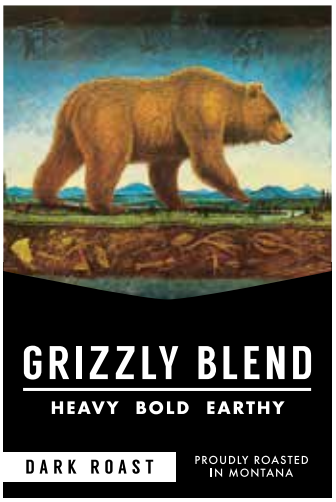
Jim passed away on December 7, 2022, with Norma following her soulmate on January 25, 2023. All of us at Vital Ground extend heartfelt condolences to their family and deep gratitude for their support of wildlife conservation. We leave the last words to Lynne, who wrote the following poem to honor "Foz":

FOZ

What could you hear
Unknown to the rest of us?
What tones, sound waves,
And treble clefs spoke
To your soul?
The winds, the ocean waves,
The Universe, or God?
With circuit boards and
Calculus you shared your
Genius with the world
A gift that will live, heal, and enlighten

Forever

-Lynne Seus



MONTANA COFFEE TRADERS
EST. 1981

Grizzly Blend logo art by Monte Dolack

A portion of every pound sold advances Vital Ground habitat protection efforts. Support wildlife and order online at: ***www.coffeetraders.com***

How to Help Restore Grizzlies to the North Cascades

By Kayla Heinze

The moss-covered conifers of the North Cascades once towered over a robust grizzly bear population. But in the 1800s, the pattern of overhunting seen across the West decimated the population to the point of local extinction.

It's been more than 25 years since the last confirmed grizzly sighting in the U.S. portion of the Cascades. After several false starts in recent years, the National Park Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are now evaluating options for restoring grizzlies to this ecosystem where they once roamed widely. Late last year, Vital Ground joined other stakeholders in submitting a public comment for the agencies' consideration as they develop their plans for restoration.

Grizzly bears belong in the North Cascades. As a barometer of ecosystem health, a restored grizzly population in the region would have positive ripple effects in boosting soil health and berry dispersal, among many other impacts. But for the people who call the region home, there are understandable worries about learning to coexist with such powerful creatures.

In anticipation of the return of grizzlies, Vital Ground has spent years partnering with wildlife managers and conservation-minded organizations to help Washington state communities prepare to live with grizzly bears once again. In 2015, we supported wildlife ecologist Chris Morgan's film "Time for the Grizzly," which highlighted the potential methods for restoring grizzlies to the North Cascades. This preemptive work can now come to fruition as people weigh in on the future of grizzlies in the area.

The agencies are considering designating the population as a 10(j) experimental population, meaning grizzlies in the ecosystem would be listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. This would allow the agencies to create management programs and special regulations specific to the Cascadian population, including translocating healthy bears from nearby ecosystems. Working with local communities to increase bear awareness and coexistence practices will also continue to be an important part of helping these bears thrive after they arrive in the North Cascades.

Make your voice heard on behalf of grizzlies. With fires destroying habitat, development expanding into rural areas, and rising temperatures causing food

The North Cascades of Washington state were once home to a thriving grizzly bear population, with a new federal reintroduction proposal gaining widespread public support.

shortages, grizzlies need as many footholds as they can get to flourish in an uncertain future. The mountains of the North Cascades offer vast wilderness, including protected national parkland, with over 9,000 acres of excellent grizzly habitat. Reintroducing them in the ecosystem is a significant piece of the Lower 48's larger grizzly conservation puzzle.

While the winter comment period is now closed, another window for public input will likely open after the next draft reintroduction plan is released. Stay tuned to ***vitalground.org/news*** and our social media channels for updates on when and how to submit a comment!

Creating a Conservation Legacy Just Got a Lot Easier

Spring is a special time at Vital Ground. As grizzly families emerge from winter dens in April and May, tiny cubs take their first steps on the landscape. Along Montana's Rocky Mountain Front, thousands of tundra swans stop to rest as part of their annual migration. In the season of renewal, it is easy to feel rejuvenated in our mission to conserve land for these amazing creatures and all the world-class wildlife of the Northern Rockies.

Spring is also a time for planting seeds—and this year, we invite you to plant a seed that protects wildlife for future generations by naming Vital Ground in your estate plan.

Vital Ground has begun a new partnership with a service called **FreeWill** that makes this important life task easier than ever. Your estate plan is an opportunity to protect your loved ones and make a lasting impact on the causes—and wild creatures—you care about. FreeWill's simple online tool makes it 100% free to create a will and name Vital Ground as a beneficiary of your plan. It's user-friendly and takes most people only around 20 minutes. You can learn more and get started today by visiting ***www.vitalground.org/legacy*** or by contacting Development Director Kim Davitt at (406) 549-8650 or kdavitt@vitalground.org.

Planned gifts sustain Vital Ground as we take a stand for future generations of wildlife and people by conserving crucial grizzly habitat. With your gift, you can join us in this hopeful work, and as a result you'll become a member of our prestigious Silvertip Legacy Circle. Silvertip members receive special invitations to in-person and online events with Vital Ground, a listing in Vital Ground's annual report, a personalized recognition certificate suitable for framing and a lifetime subscription to Vital News.

FREEWILL

Grizzly bears connect us to a sense of wildness and possibility. Their presence on the land benefits entire ecosystems in ways both large and small. As these great bears return to our shared landscapes this spring, we invite you to explore the possibility of giving back to grizzlies and growing your legacy and impact for wildlife.

We're Moving! Vital Ground Relocating to New Office

When Vital Ground moved its headquarters from Utah to Montana in 2005, the world was a bit different. *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* was the year's top movie, the first iPhone was still two years away from existing, and the possibility of a single connected grizzly bear population in the Northern Rockies was a distant pipedream for conservation biologists. With a four-person staff, Vital Ground was just beginning to work as a land trust after 15 years spent primarily funding other organizations' conservation projects.

Eighteen years after that move, grizzlies are reclaiming historic range in southwestern Montana, central Idaho and western Wyoming. The conversation has turned from not "if" but "when" some of the Lower 48's populations will re-connect. And thanks to supporters like you and many partners, Vital Ground has carved out a crucial role in the grizzly's recovery journey, completing more than 50 conservation easements and land purchases while continuing to partner broadly with other conservation outfits.

Along the way, our staff has more than doubled in size and finally outgrown our beloved office in the Heritage Hall building at 20 Fort Missoula Road. We won't be moving far, however! Thanks to our friends and property managers at the Northern Rockies Heritage Center, we'll be staying in the Fort Missoula complex and relocating into a larger office space with a building all to ourselves.

In practical terms, the change will be even smaller for supporters like you. It's a change of just one digit, in fact: ***Vital Ground's new address is 30 Fort Missoula Rd., Missoula, MT 59804.***

We've loved our space in Heritage Hall and the many visits we've enjoyed from supporters like you, whether you live in the area or made a point of stopping by from afar. Once the dust settles from our early June move and our favorite wildlife art is hung back up on new walls, we hope you'll pop in and say hello in our new home!

Vital Ground moves out of our Heritage Hall office this spring and into a larger nearby space at Fort Missoula. Our new address is: 30 Fort Missoula Rd., Missoula, MT 59804.

Fond and Grateful Farewells: Kevin Rhoades and Jack Capp

By Matt Hart

An office move isn't the only change afoot within the Vital Ground team this spring. The first half of 2023 finds us bidding heartfelt farewells to Kevin Rhoades and Jack Capp, two pillars of the organization's progress over the last decade who are both moving in new directions this year.

Joining the Vital Ground staff in 2012, Kevin Rhoades served as our communications director with diligence, eloquence and foresight. He oversaw Vital Ground's print and digital marketing and outreach, producing countless newsletters, brochures, annual reports and mailings. He led our charge into the multimedia milieu of the 21st century, spearheading the growth of Vital Ground's video production and social media efforts and documenting dozens of events and field trips by camera. Over a great many board and staff meetings, his technical expertise and careful insights have helped shape the vision, strategy and day-to-day decision-making of Vital Ground.

Over the last five years, Kevin greatly expanded the organization's business partner and monthly membership programs. His ambitious goals and steady follow-through have built an ever-growing foundation of sustaining monthly support from our donor base, culminating in a highly succesful monthly giving campaign this spring. Drawing from his professional experience in sales and marketing, he also tirelessly recruited and stewarded many corporate partnerships that have generated monumental support for Vital Ground's conservation efforts. From Kodiak Cakes to the continued use of Monte Dolack's art on our logo and license plate, some of the largest contributors to Vital Ground's work for wildlife stem from Kevin's relationship-building.

Kevin Rhoades

Kevin will continue managing those collaborations in his current part-time role of Recurring Partnerships Director through the end of June, when he will embark on a well-earned next chapter prioritizing time spent outdoors with his wife, two sons and new granddaughter, not to mention a young bird dog that will keep him plenty busy. Rumor has it he won't give up his conservation contributions entirely, with an open seat awaiting him as an advisor on Vital Ground's Development Committee.

Meanwhile, those of us tasked with filling his large shoes in the Communications Department will greatly miss his attention to detail and kind leadership. From all of the Vital Ground family, bear hugs and huge thanks to Kevin!

This year also sees the departure of Jack Capp from Vital Ground's board of trustees. Following a distinguished 38-year career with the U.S. Forest Service, Jack began serving on the board in 2011. Based in Fort Collins, Colo., he brought exceptional wisdom, thoughtful analysis and ever-present good cheer to dozens of board meetings, committee calls and in-person events.

Jack Capp

Most recently, Jack has helped lead a push to prioritize diversity, equity and inclusion on Vital Ground's board and in its larger organizational strategy. In this area and many more, Jack's contributions to Vital Ground will long outlive his tenure on the board. While we will greatly miss his sharp mind and upbeat presence, we wish Jack the very best as he turns his focus more fully to his family and enjoying time spent in his backyard Colorado mountains.

A last, griz-sized thank you to Jack and Kevin for their truly outstanding service to Vital Ground and wildlife conservation!

BROWN BEAR'S WORLD

FOLLOWING THEIR FOOTSTEPS

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' KINSHIP WITH BEARS

Larry Aumiller

By Kayla Heinze

Search the internet for news on grizzly bears and you're likely to find plenty of articles detailing human-bear encounters that end in tragic fatalities. These gruesome headlines represent what are, in reality, incredibly rare incidents. According to data from Yellowstone National Park, which anchors the second-largest grizzly population in the Lower 48, only eight people have been killed by bears in 150 years of the park's operation. That's an average of one human fatality every 18.75 years. Just last year, however, officials euthanized 11 grizzlies in and around the park following encounters with people.

The way we talk and write about wildlife matters. When we oversimplify the narrative and sensationalize bears as vicious killers, we neglect the many benefits of having them around. This disservice to our grizzly neighbors also discounts the practiced wisdom of communities that have long lived alongside bears.

As Indigenous peoples in the Mountain West have been expressing since their first interactions with Europeans, a healthy fear of bears is appropriate, but it is not the whole story. Their teachings about kinship reveal that we miss out on a whole host of positive interactions when we adopt antagonistic attitudes toward wildlife.

Many who live in grizzly country already understand that, beyond fear, interactions with bears can also involve feelings of awe, curiosity, humility and joy. These powerful experiences will only happen as long as healthy grizzly populations remain. Vital Ground is working to repair two centuries of destructive history between people and bears in the West by protecting habitat and helping communities prevent conflicts, including through tribal partnerships.

THE ANCIENT PATH

Before modern borders crisscrossed the raging rivers and serene forests of western North America, this landscape was segmented by a different set of boundaries.

In 2021, a study confirmed what the Nuxalk, Haíłzaqv, Xai'xais, Gitga'at, and Wuikinuxv First Nations of present-day Canada had long held true about their historic relationship with bears. Mapping archaeological evidence and brown bear genetic data together, researchers found that three distinct subpopulations of brown bears aligned with the territories of three Indigenous groups separated by language. Native communities and bears congregated around shared areas of resource abundance and evolved unique genetic and linguistic identities as a result.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) informs us that this wasn't just a case of cohabitation. Indigenous peoples were, and continue to be, reliant on bears as teachers. Quite literally.

"Elders pass on stories about people watching and learning from bears as they eat many of the same

things," explained Jennifer Walkus, a council member of the Wuikinuxv First Nation, in a recent article in *The Conversation* co-written with Lauren H. Henson of the University of Victoria. "Bears and people both learn from their ancestors what to eat and where."

From delicious thimbleberry and salmonberry to medicinal clover and dandelion, closely watching bears helped Indigenous communities learn which plants were good to eat and where they grew readily. As parents of each species passed these lessons on, humans and bears learned how to thrive alongside one another and did so for many generations thanks to stewardship practices that ensured there was enough for everyone.

WALKING TOGETHER AS STEWARDS

Each summer, following the paths of the mighty rivers back home to peaceful streams, salmon return to the inland waters of the Great Bear Rainforest along the northern Pacific Coast. Two of the largest mammals in the forest wade into the current. With either claws or nets at the ready, they begin their harvest.

Both bears and Indigenous peoples rely heavily on the annual salmon migration for sustenance and pay this abundance forward. Whether through salmon celebrations that offer reminders about respect and reciprocity or by transporting salmon remains into the forest to nourish the soil, they give back to promote the well-being of the entire ecological community.

Dallas Smith, president of the Nanwakolas Council (a land management group that consists of six First Nations), explains that being attentive to bears is also part of their stewardship work.

"The grizzly bear is an icon in our cultural heritage. It's always been important to work in harmony with them," he said in a recent interview with the CBC.

Protecting grizzlies not only safeguards their ability to inspire wonder and offer spiritual guidance, it lets them continue their work as an ecological force. With claws that aerate the soil, scat that spreads seeds and a salmon feast that leads to the redistribution of marine nutrients, robust bear populations contribute to the flourishing of the broader ecosystem. The give back as much as they receive—another lesson bears have to teach us.

TREADING CAREFULLY

Part of loving grizzlies is prioritizing safety on our shared landscapes. Carrying bear spray and properly storing attractants minimizes the chance of encounters turning hostile, allowing us to experience the awe-inspiring power of grizzly bears without putting anyone in danger.

Taking these steps also honors the generosity of bears as caretakers of the land who have a right to be here just as much as we do. Your support of Vital Ground's mission protects this right so both bears and people may be sustained by our shared wild spaces.

We can allow alarming headlines to provoke anxiety and create separation between us and our fellow mammals or, following the leadership of Indigenous communities, we can choose to walk a different kind of path, one where we learn from ancient wisdom, modern science, and from bears themselves about how to respect the necessary boundaries that keep us all safe.

Vital Ground is deeply grateful for supporters like you, part of the conservation community that helps ensure the presence of grizzly populations for generations to come. Beyond sharing their immense knowledge, tribal nations are active members of this community. Our Kennedy Creek Project, for example, was completed in 2020 in collaboration with the Blackfeet Nation, purchasing 74 acres of rich habitat just outside Glacier National Park then returning it to tribal ownership and stewardship.

"Kennedy Creek is inhabited by one of the few populations of bull trout existing on the east slope of the Rocky Mountains," said Buzz Cobell, Director of Blackfeet Nation Fish and Wildlife, at the time. "In addition, this area is used extensively by grizzly bears, moose, elk, deer and other important wildlife species. Thanks to our collaborative efforts this special area will continue to be wild and undeveloped."

From our Indigenous partners who continue to care for their ancestral territories to conservation supporters far and wide, we give thanks for all who walk with us on the path of stewardship, one where pawprints and footprints fall side by side.

NON PROFIT ORG
US POSTAGE PAID
PERMIT #536
MISSOULA, MT 59801

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.

♻Printed on PEFC certified paper with soy-based inks.

©The Vital Ground Foundation

Contact us at:
The Vital Ground Foundation
30 Fort Missoula Road
Missoula, MT 59804

(406) 549-8650 (Office)
info@vitalground.org
www.vitalground.org

Has your email or mailing address changed? Please let us know!

ACCREDITED LAND TRUST ACCREDITATION COMMISSION

VITAL GROUND
FOUNDATION

FOUNDERS
Doug and Lynne Seus
Bart the Bear™

BOARD OF TRUSTEES
Kelly Johnson, Chair
Scott Birmingham, Vice Chair
Sou Barrett, Secretary
Tim Polich, Treasurer
Wally Becky
Matt Dusek
Thomas H. Fey
Russell Fox
John Hechtel
Jo Lowe
Maureen Mayer
Andrea Nasi
Lynne Seus
Stuart Strahl, Ph.D.

TRUSTEE EMERITUS
Doug Seus

STAFF
Ryan Lutey, J.D.
Executive Director
Emma Davidson
Administrative Coordinator
Kim Davitt
Development Director
Mitch Doherty
Conservation Director
Shannon Drye
Administration & Finance Director
Matt Hart
Communications Manager
Kayla Heinze
Communications & Administrative Specialist
Kevin Rhoades
Recurring Partnerships Director
Brittani Rosas
Land Steward

NEWSLETTER
Matt Hart
Editor
Kayla Heinze
Communications Specialist

ADVISORY COUNCIL
Gael Bissell
Douglas H. Chadwick
Lyle Gold
Chris Johns
Keith Johnson
Melissa Kling
Colleen Matt
Nancy McLaughlin, J.D.
Michael Proctor, Ph.D.
Banu Qureshi
Melanie Seus
Theresa Young

AMBASSADORS
Honey Bump the Bear™
Tank the Bear™

Vital News is published twice annually. © 2023 by Vital Ground.
All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part
without written permission is prohibited.