The Vital Ground Foundation | Fall 2023

VITAL NEWS

ONE LANDSCAPE FOR WILDLIFE AND PEOPLE

CELEBRATING 1 MILLION ACRES OF CONSERVATION

Did you ever try to count to a thousand as a kid? A million? Numbers can seem to lose significance as they get higher, so let's start small. When it comes to acres, one acre is a square of land measuring a little over 200 feet per side. A million of those makes up an area slightly larger than the state of Rhode Island, an area big enough to provide a home for countless life forms large and small.

By the end of 2023, supporters like you will have pushed Vital Ground past the million acre mark in measuring our overall conservation impact since 1990. Through Vital Ground's own land protection projects and investment in partners' efforts to conserve grizzly habitat and prevent conflicts between bears and people, you have helped protect and enhance over 1 million acres for wildlife. You've also helped us provide just over $1 million in partner grants, reflecting the truth that in conservation and life, nobody can go it alone. Across grizzly country, you're making a difference. Keeping reading for the latest on where and how!

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Photo: "Seasons of the Grizzly" by Robert Scriba

VITAL GROUND
FOUNDATION

A Million Reasons for Gratitude—and Motivation

In our day-to-day business, Vital Ground strives to maintain a laser-like focus on active and future projects, rather than dwelling on what the organization accomplished last year or over the past decade. The vast majority of our engaged donors like you care more about opportunities that lie ahead than past accomplishments, leaning into the challenges you can personally affect through an investment of time, energy or financial support.

But periodically, it's worthwhile to celebrate collective successes and milestones as a way of expressing gratitude to the volunteers and supporters who make each win for wildlife possible. As Vital Ground turns the corner on 33 years of working to protect and restore grizzly bear populations for future generations, we find the organization approaching two milestones warranting significant appreciation:

- By the end of 2023, Vital Ground will reach 1 million acres of habitat protected or enhanced through the combined products of our own land conservation projects and investments made in partners' efforts; and
- Through 2023, our Conservation Partners Grant Program will have cumulatively disbursed more than $1 million to other nonprofit, agency and local community partners to prevent conflicts between bears and people.

Vital Ground is being propelled beyond those two noteworthy benchmarks by the ongoing One Landscape Initiative, which has now surpassed $20 million in conservation investments since its launch in 2019. By the start of next year, your support of the One Landscape Initiative during those five years will have resulted in Vital Ground's completion of 22 conservation easements and land acquisitions benefiting myriad native wildlife species, while simultaneously allowing us to disburse more than 80 individual partner grants to collaborators working to build social tolerance for grizzlies throughout Montana, Idaho and Wyoming.

Pine Butte Swamp along Montana's Rocky Mountain Front, key grizzly habitat and the site of Vital Ground's first conservation investment in 1990. How far we've come thanks to supporters like you!

From all of us on Vital Ground's staff, board and advisory council, heartfelt thanks for carrying the organization to the forefront of grizzly conservation. Here's to the next million acres!

Warm holiday wishes,

Ryan Lutey, Executive Director

PROTECT AND RESTORE

CONSERVATION AND INSPIRATION ABOUND IN MONTANA'S WILD YAAK VALLEY

A restoration contractor builds fencing for native shrub plantings at Vital Ground's Broadie Habitat Preserve in the Yaak Valley of northwestern Montana. (Photo: Kayla Heinze)

By Kayla Heinze

Just as we finished setting up the video equipment, the wolves started howling. We stood in awe and silence for a few minutes while we listened to their haunting voices rising from the forested hills just beyond Vital Ground's Broadie Habitat Preserve.

Along with Communications Director Matt, Land Steward Brittani and our videographer Eric Ian, I had the pleasure of spending a few days in Montana's Yaak Valley earlier this fall. We were there to meet with partners, check in on a new restoration project and chat with wildlife biologists in an area crucial to grizzly recovery.

The Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem currently hosts an estimated grizzly population of about 60 individuals south of the Canadian border, with about 25-30 of those being in the Yaak Valley. This population sits adjacent to the similarly sized Selkirk population. It is also within migration distance of the much larger Northern Continental Divide population in and around Glacier National Park, though U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Wayne Kasworm says there remains no gene flow between the populations.

Despite their relatively small numbers and limited connectivity, grizzly populations in northwestern Montana and neighboring northern Idaho are slowly growing. Kasworm and his team actively monitor mortality rates and females with cubs to assess the health of the population.

Having long worked in the Yaak, Vital Ground's projects there protect open space and movement for this gradually recovering population. At the newly-expanded Fowler Creek Project *(see pg. 9)*, we saw bear and wolf scat. At Broadie, Kasworm told us his telemetry data showed a sow grizzly with cubs had been using the area. As we talked, our contracted restoration team planted native shrubs, like chokecherry and willows, to improve habitat for bears and other wildlife. They built fenced enclosures around the saplings to keep deer and elk out. Hawks circled overhead. It was clear that protecting these places enables wildlife of all kinds to thrive.

Your support—alongside the Wildlife Land Trust's project partnership at Broadie and Fowler Creek—backs these innovative conservation, restoration and coexistence efforts that maintain the valley's uniquely wild character.

This trip was my first to the Yaak. Being greeted by wolf howls echoing through the forest immediately confirmed what I had heard about the valley—the Yaak is a special place full of equally special animals.

Hear the wolves and watch a new video on our work in the Yaak at ***youtube.com/ForTheGrizzly***

STEPPING STONES

VITAL GROUND AND Y2Y EXPAND A KEY WILDLIFE PATHWAY TO THE BITTERROOTS

Photo: Randy Beacham

By Matt Hart

Connecting a regional landscape so future generations of wildlife and people can thrive: if it sounds like a bold, grand vision, that's because it is. And it's the vision you support as part of the Vital Ground community. The work of pursuing it, however, can seem less grand. Sometimes, it can feel like a numbers game.

But numbers measure progress, and acre by acre, conservation progress is happening in the most vital locations within this big, regional vision. When Vital Ground expands conservation efforts in the same places you may have read about before, it isn't because we're out of new spots to work. It's because we remain focused on the places where your support makes the biggest impact on long-term recovery for grizzlies and regional connectivity for the Northern Rockies' full diversity of life.

Over two phases in 2023, that focus turned toward a key confluence area in western Montana, where the Bull River drops down from the Cabinet Mountains into the Clark Fork River. Together with our project partners at the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y), Vital Ground has worked with private landowners to protect more than 150 contiguous acres from subdivision and development within this key habitat linkage zone for grizzly bears and many other species.

"Collaborating with Vital Ground in their purchase of our property has exceeded our expectations while aligning with common interests," said Mark Hedges on behalf of the Hedges family, the previous owners of 22 acres acquired in October. "Our family found an opportunity that provided personal benefit while aligning with our goal of being a good steward of the land."

The Bull River-Clark Fork confluence area serves as an important linkage zone for wildlife between the Cabinet Mountains to the north and the Bitterroot Mountains to the south. With development pressures high across the region and subdivision already present in other parts of this confluence area, the expansion of a protected Bitterroot-Cabinet habitat corridor marks an important step in preventing the isolation of core grizzly habitat.

"Animals need enough room to sustain a healthy population and roam freely," says Pelah Hoyt, Y2Y's Director of Landscape Connectivity. "By working with willing landowners and partners like Vital Ground, we are able to restore key corridors and improve wildlife movement parcel by parcel."

A FORWARD-LOOKING LINK FOR GRIZZLIES

While providing habitat for a wide range of wildlife and fish species, the cluster of properties purchased at the Bull River-Clark Fork confluence area just north of Montana Highway 200 serves as a link of particular

importance for grizzly bears across a larger landscape.

In Montana's northwestern corner and the Idaho Panhandle, grizzlies persist in much smaller numbers than they do in the ecosystems anchored by Glacier and Yellowstone national parks. The Bull River-Clark Fork project improves connectivity between these sensitive populations, protecting a southward pathway from the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem, which is home to around 60 grizzlies. Over the years, biologists have documented only a handful of grizzlies moving between the Cabinet Mountains and neighboring populations but consider genetic exchange between ecosystems crucial for the species' long-term survival in the Lower 48 states.

"In order to get gene flow, you first have to have movement," says Wayne Kasworm, a grizzly bear biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service who has documented several grizzlies near the project area in recent years. "Grizzly bear linkage across the Clark Fork River is important for the future of bears in the Bitterroot. This project is a start and a stepping stone to protecting habitat for bears to make that journey."

South of the Clark Fork, the Selway-Bitterroot Ecosystem extends deep into the wilderness areas of central Idaho. This historic bear habitat currently lacks a resident grizzly population, seeing only occasional wandering bears from other areas. As a geographic connector between western Montana, northern Idaho and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, the Selway-Bitterroot represents a missing piece in restoring a thriving, interconnected grizzly population to the region.

URGENT TIMES FOR CONSERVATION

Vital Ground and Y2Y have worked hand-in-hand with biologists for years to identify safe pathways for wildlife across linkage zones like the Bull River-Clark Fork confluence area. Maintaining these passages is increasingly important as more and more people relocate to Montana and Idaho. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, both states' populations have increased every year since 2010, with both landing in the top 10 states for population growth rate between 2021 and 2022.

"Given the level of development pressure Northwest Montana is facing we're thrilled to be making another conservation investment in the Bull River linkage area," says Mitch Doherty, conservation director for Vital Ground. "In just two years we've been able to protect over 150 acres in one of the last undeveloped connectivity areas along this stretch of Highway 200."

Beyond bears, the project protects important range for elk, moose and sensitive species like wolverine and Canada lynx. It also helps maintain the rural, scenic character of the Lower Clark Fork Valley amid high real estate pressures. The 22-acre October acquisition includes primarily forested habitat and nearly a half-mile of frontage along Highway 200, lying directly south of 80 acres that Vital Ground and Y2Y purchased in 2021 and southeast of 49 acres protected earlier this year. The protected corridor now provides a solid link between national forestlands to the north in the Cabinets and the Clark Fork valley bottom.

"We are delighted to team up with Vital Ground once again," says Hoyt. "Working together with landowners to restore habitat, conserve wild places, and secure connections and corridors will make a difference for generations of people and wildlife to come."

Additional financial support for the Bull River-Clark Fork project came from the Heart of the Rockies Initiative and their Keep It Connected program.

A NEW STRAND

AT THE J BAR L RANCH, A VITAL GROUND PARTNER ACTS FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

By Kayla Heinze

At the J Bar L Ranch in southwestern Montana, the plan is often that things will not go according to plan. This was particularly true on the unseasonably cold and rainy day this August when I joined five other conservationists and Hilary Zaranek, who runs the ranch with her husband Andrew Anderson, to help with some fieldwork.

"If you get the ATV stuck, just leave it," Hilary told us before we finished our fencing repair and installation project from the day before. We were going a different way today, one that had already taken us through a herd of cattle, and which promised boggy conditions ahead.

As clouds cozied into the nooks of the hills, we crowded around Hilary's phone to map our route. Much of my two days at the J Bar L involved figuring out how to get vehicles, equipment and people across the rugged landscape of the Centennial Valley to where they needed to be. Without a paved road for over 20 miles in any direction, the working lands and national wildlife refuge that populate the valley have not succumbed to the pressures of human-oriented convenience. Wildness reigns, and, for those willing to accept it, there are rewards around every bend in the winding dirt roads.

We did get one of the ATVs stuck, but, after some determined pushing, we were able to backtrack and take it another way across the creek. Dodging sagebrush and baby grouse, we made our bumpy way up to the fence line. Each of us sporting a pair of already-soaked-through jeans, the fog grew even thicker and our work began.

A NEW RANCH FOR RETURNING ANIMALS

The term "frontlines" implies warfare, and Hilary was careful to avoid characterizing her relationship with wildlife on the ranch using a conflict framework. About 50 miles west of Yellowstone National Park, grizzlies and wolves are prevalent on the ranch. After populations of these predators started to rebound within the protected national park boundaries during the late 1990s, individuals and packs eventually wandered out further, back onto these lands that their species had been absent from for nearly a century.

So while the J Bar L is not at war, this Vital Ground conservation partner certainly exists on a frontline, a leading edge where ranchers are once again learning how to work and live alongside powerful wild creatures.

It does take additional time and labor to keep livestock alive with these predators on the land, but, to Hilary, the real challenge is the process of personal growth that their presence prompts.

"In coming face to face with the paradigms and subsequent practices that have defined our lives and that have defined who we think we are, we are forced to reckon with some truths that can be pretty hard to see and make sense of," Hilary said via email. "Conflict prevention work, for us, is evolving the paradigm of the traditional ranch so that the new ranch reflects a new relationship with land and animals."

The animals, and opportunities for new relationships with them, are abundant. On just the small portion of acreage we covered during my visit, Hilary pointed out a willow thicket where she once spooked a couple of bears while riding the ATV and a forested hillside where she has found multiple bear-made beds in the cow parsnip. At the dinner table, she passed around a video of two curious grizzlies inspecting one of her trail cameras, her voice toned with pride and affection.

But as Hilary was quick to remind us, these predators are just one of many moving pieces she needs to factor into her decisions. They have lost livestock to bears and wolves over the years, but many more have died from eating tall larkspur, a toxic but appealing plant that can escape even watchful eyes on a ranch as big as the J Bar L. These dead cows can, in turn, attract predators.

This is one example of why Hilary and Andrew do not think about conflict prevention in a silo. Interconnection is inescapable on the ranch. "When the business works, the ecosystem works," Hilary said repeatedly. "And when the ecosystem works, the business works."

Grizzly dig sites pepper the ranch, their long claws aerating the soil. The J Bar L has also experimented with grazing plans that pack cattle into smaller pastures and rotate them more frequently. Anecdotally, Hilary saw this pattern dissuade depredation. And it has myriad other benefits, from carbon storage and preventing erosion to supporting water retention and quality—all of which increases the resiliency and productivity of the ranch.

Of course, everything will not always go smoothly. Hilarly mentioned that a future of ranching alongside predators might also require factoring in a few extra livestock deaths each year. This hints at another pillar of the J Bar L's philosophy, being proactive rather than reactive.

The plan is that things will not always go according to plan. But with the experience of years spent riding the range in all sorts of conditions, these ranchers know the ecosystem well enough to embrace its dynamic wildness.

As photojournalist Louise Johns, who has profiled the family, put it, "Instead of being a dominant force, the Andersons strive to be part of the landscape, humbled by the rugged space that surrounds them, rather than threatened by its unpredictability."

FENCING FOR RANCHERS AND WILDLIFE

Untangling barbed wire requires patience and persistence. It felt like slow work, especially compared to the herd of pronghorn dashing across the valley below us, but in two days we fixed and installed a mixture of barbed wire and electric fencing that allowed Hilary and Andrew to move their cattle into a new pasture.

Fencing repairs might not seem like the most obvious or pressing project related to grizzly protection, but in an interconnected system like the ranch, all efforts and topics play a role. Hay prices, for example, may not be directly related to wildlife, but they greatly impact the people who tend the lands both wildlife and livestock depend on.

Like most conservation work, it was not particularly glamorous. I tracked my fair share of mud home to Missoula, but I was happy to carry tools across the sopping landscape for those two days. Because here's the thing: when we talk about keeping the landscape open for wildlife, people like Hilary and Andrew are the ones on the ground every day making it a reality. Anything we can do to support them in turn supports their ability to care for the high-quality habitat on J Bar L property. That's why Vital Ground has helped fund the J Bar L's conservation efforts for two years now and why I made the long drive to be there in person for a few days of fieldwork.

THE HUMAN ECOSYSTEM

Human community is also considered part of the wholeness of the ranch ecosystem. This was obvious from

(continued on page 8)

(continued from page 7)

Hilary and Andrew's invitation for their partners to visit the ranch and their hospitality once we arrived. Circled around a delicious steak dinner, we shared stories from across the region that made it clear that the J Bar L, while truly a special place, is just one microsystem within an even broader coexistence and conservation biome. Across the West, people on working lands are bridging traditional practices with modern urgencies, like preserving biodiversity and extreme weather.

It's important to note, however, that ranchers are not a monolith. Hilary was honest that her peers exist on a spectrum of willingness when it comes to adapting to the presence of predators and other wildlife. Part of the J Bar L's mission is to share what they learn with others. Building support systems can be just as necessary to the success of a ranch as building fencing, especially since many ranchers already deal with difficult financial situations and other tiring realities.

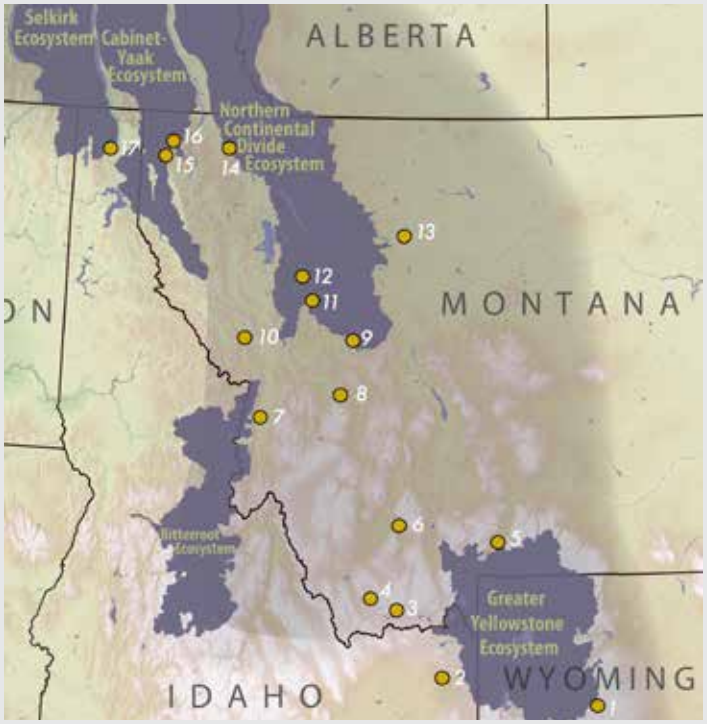
"The combination of underlying, and often unacknowledged, stress and pain in people's lives makes their world feel threatening and provokes defense," Hilary said via email. "Defensiveness and fear limit potential to grow and heal and to think creatively and collaboratively."

Conservationists and consumers have a role to play in helping ranchers increase their capacity for innovative thinking. Supporting food being produced with regenerative values and investing in reciprocal relationships with those food-producers is a display of solidarity that can lighten the load enough for the potential burden of living alongside wildlife to become a privilege. With stresses lifted by community support, ranchers can have the space to take necessary precautions and genuinely enjoy being neighbors with these remarkable species. The honor and awe she feels sharing the landscape with grizzlies was obvious to me from just our short time together, but Hilary poetically confirmed it after.

"It is the presence, the abundance, the magic and the wild expression of life all around us, no matter the situation, that we cherish most of all," she said via email. "Having them out there just makes the mundane that much more interesting."

I didn't actually see any bears during my time at the J Bar L. But Hilary is right—just knowing that they were out there filled our slightly dreary workday with a sense of vitality and enchantment. It's a feeling I've come to know well since moving to the Northern Rockies, and it was especially visceral on the lovingly stewarded landscape of the ranch. Life begets more life, and with all this wildlife around, even building fences starts to feel a whole lot more exciting.

2023 Conservation Partners



The J Bar L Ranch was one of Vital Ground's 17 conservation partner grant recipients performing crucial conflict prevention work across the Northern Rockies in 2023:

1. Shoshone National Forest: Bear-resistant campground sanitation
2. Teton Valley Bear Wise: Public bear-aware education in Idaho's Teton Valley
3. J Bar L Ranch: Grizzly tracking and strategic livestock grazing management
4. Centennial Valley Association: Range rider program outside Yellowstone NP
5. Bear Aware Gardiner: Electric fencing in Yellowstone gateway community
6. Future West: Bear attractant storage in Montana's Ruby Valley and Gravelly Range
7. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (Bitterroot Valley): Bear-resistant garbage containers
8. Montana FWP (Upper Clark Fork Valley): Livestock carcass removal
9. Montana FWP (Blackfoot Valley): Livestock carcass removal and electric fencing
10. Alberton Bear Smart: Hazard assessment and public education
11. Clearwater Valley Bear Smart: Hazard assessment and public education
12. Swan Valley Bear Resources: Electric fencing, bear-resistant garbage and public education
13. Conservation Science Collaborative: Rocky Mountain Front range rider program
14. North Fork Preservation Association: Bear-smart incident response and public education
15. Kootenai River Development Council: Apple gleaning program with Pink Bench Distillery
16. Yaak Valley Forest Council: Public bear safety education
17. State of Idaho Office of Species Conservation: Kootenai Valley livestock carcass removal

Fowler Creek Project Adds Newly-Protected Acres

Key wildlife habitat and the rural, scenic character of Montana's Yaak Valley will be protected for generations to come after Vital Ground enlarged its Fowler Creek conservation project to more than 500 acres with a land acquisition in early November.

With major project support from the Wildlife Land Trust, Vital Ground's expansion of the Fowler Creek project gives grizzlies and numerous other species a wider protected corridor for movement across the Yaak Valley bottom. The 64 newly-conserved acres lie directly west of the Fowler Creek area that Vital Ground protected with two land acquisitions in 2021. Under Vital Ground ownership, the area's stewardship can now be streamlined to best maintain connectivity for wildlife crossing the valley bottom between habitat strongholds on surrounding Kootenai National Forest lands.

With public land on three sides and two creeks running through the complex, the project carries a broad range of conservation benefits. By protecting wetlands and preventing subdivision, it maintains the Yaak's water quality and its enduring rural character. With other parts of northwestern Montana experiencing unprecedented spikes in their real estate markets, ensuring a conservation outcome for the Fowler Creek area will benefit wildlife and people for generations to come.

"Protecting crucial habitat and connectivity for grizzlies and other far-ranging wildlife is increasingly urgent," says Jim Reed, Executive Director of Wildlife Land Trust. "We're 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."

For the Yaak's 25-30 grizzly bears, maintaining an open, connected landscape is a matter of survival. The population's long-term future depends on increasing its genetic diversity through breeding with bears from elsewhere. With a recent uptick in grizzly movement

Randy Beacham

between the Yaak and the neighboring Cabinet mountains, conservation of habitat areas like Fowler Creek allows bears to move across the larger region.

"It's only in the last decade or so that we've started to see movement from the Yaak to the Cabinets or vice versa, places that are not anchored by large wildernesses or national parks," says Wayne Kasworm, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist who has led grizzly recovery in the Cabinet-Yaak since 1983, and who has documented a grizzly sow and cub recently traveling through the Fowler Creek complex. "When it comes to protection of private lands, it's important to conserve some of the larger properties where we have that opportunity. When we talk about easements and acquisitions, we talk about things that outlive those of us that are here now. That's an important thing for wildlife going forward into the future."

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Reintroduction Efforts Resume for North Cascades Grizzlies

The borders of "grizzly country" have never been set in stone. Once these large mammals covered nearly the entire western portion of North America, stretching from Mexico up to the Arctic and from the Pacific Coast eastward across the Great Plains. Since their crossing of the Bering land bridge some 50,000 years ago, brown bears have had a vast and significant presence on this landscape. Since European settlers pushed west and brought with them development, overhunting and fears about predation, the range of these bears has been significantly reduced and degraded.

Today we are living alongside these remarkable bears through another shift. Grizzlies in the lower 48 states remain only in islands of refuge, though their populations in four designated recovery zones across the Northern Rockies are slowly growing and expanding. Now, plans to bring them back to a fifth recovery area have taken another step forward.

After multiple starts and stops in the past decade, last year efforts began again by the National Park Service (NPS) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to explore reintroducing grizzlies to the North Cascades of Washington. This ecosystem, with over 9,000 square miles of quality wilderness habitat, is also a USFWS-designated recovery zone for the species but has had no resident population for at least a quarter century.

Along with other wildlife conservation groups, Vital Ground supports efforts to bring grizzlies back to their historic home in the North Cascades. We have submitted comments on past drafts of the Environment Impact Statement (EIS), and the agencies recently offered a new draft with two further windows for public comment that closed on November 13 .

In late September, the NPS and USFWS announced their request for comments on the latest reintroduction proposal and also on the proposed rule to designate the reintroduced bears as a 10(j) experimental population. The designation would allow a wider range of conflict-prevention measures to be taken, with the draft EIS outlining actions for reintroduction with or without a 10(j) designation, or for no reintroduction actions.

Vital Ground submitted comments in early November supporting the two alternative actions for reintroduction while rejecting the "no action" alternative. We support grizzly reintroduction either as a 10(j) experimental population or without the designation, with the latter option allowing for varying numbers and frequencies of proposed grizzly bear releases into the ecosystem in order to achieve the restoration goal in a shorter time period.

While there is understandable apprehension about living alongside grizzlies, local communities have been preparing for years for the possibility of grizzly bears being on the landscape once again. In past years, Vital Ground has funded several partner projects to help spread coexistence tools and bear awareness in Washington, so adaptation to the grizzly's return can be a privilege rather than a burden.

We believe the natural heritage of this region is an unmeasurable gift. Though much of the West's recent history has been marked by loss of wildlife, we can still shift the tide toward a future of abundance. Stay tuned to our email newsletter to learn about future opportunities to make your voice heard on behalf of grizzlies' return to the North Cascades, an important step in the species' ongoing recovery process.

Robert Scriba

Vital Ground Welcomes Two New Trustees to Board

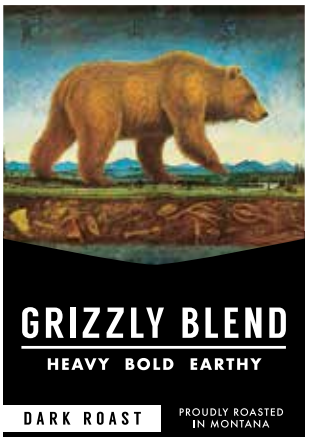
As grizzly populations continue to recover and expand their ranges, Vital Ground's conservation work is matching their pace. Our Board of Trustees provides the foundational guidance and support that launches these efforts, and we're thrilled to see the board grow with the additions of Dale Becker and Danielle Feidler.

Dale is a familiar face in the Montana wildlife conservation community. He grew up on a farm in western Iowa and worked for a time with bears and big cats at the Omaha Zoological Society before moving to Montana. Dale earned his B. S. and M. S. degrees in Wildlife Biology at the University of Montana, with an early specialty in raptor ecology.

Dale then served as the Tribal Wildlife Program Manager for the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes at the Flathead Indian Reservation for 32 years, where he developed and oversaw a widely recognized wildlife management program. He specialized in program planning and wildlife policy, rare species management, highway wildlife mitigation and hydroelectric mitigation, tribal treaty/wildlife issues, interagency wildlife management and environmental assessment. Dale developed a training program for tribal students pursuing wildlife management careers and created The Wildlife Society's Native People's Wildlife Management Working Group. He has served on numerous wildlife-related boards and is a current Board Member of the Montana Wildlife Federation. Dale and his wife, Marilyn, live near Creston, Mont.

Danielle Feidler's story is one of two countries, and also one of countryside and city. Raised on a 100-acre farm in northwestern Pennsylvania, Danielle developed a love of the wild, but her profession took her to Canada's largest urban area, Toronto.

Her work in responsible residential development for over 20 years, combined with her strong background in community engagement and marketing, will support Vital Ground's efforts to expand public bear awareness and education. Danielle serves on the board of Honour the Work, is Co-Chair of the Urban Land Institute's mentorship program and was recently recognized as a Women's Leadership Initiative Champion, a celebration of women's leadership in building a stronger Toronto Region through responsible land use. In addition to her work as Principal and Founder of Fire Up Culture, Danielle is a wife, mother and passionate nature lover—both on land and at sea—where she dedicates time to ensure nature's beauty is preserved for today and future generations.



MONTANA COFFEE TRADERS
EST. 1981

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

Grizzly Blend logo art by Monte Dolack

New Staffers: Welcome, Tanner Williams and Chelsea Klocke!

As Vital Ground's conservation impact continues to grow, so does our staff. Helping expand our capacity during an urgent time for wildlife, Tanner Williams joins our team as Conservation Project Manager and Chelsea Klocke as Administrative & Finance Assistant.

Based out of Spokane, Wash., Tanner is perfectly positioned to increase Vital Ground's conservation impact in northern Idaho, northeastern Washington and northwestern Montana. Tanner grew up in Sandpoint, Idaho, and spent most of his childhood exploring the surrounding Selkirk, Purcell and Cabinet mountain ranges, making him intimately familiar with a key region in the grizzly's ongoing story of recovery.

Tanner's early outdoor experiences gave him a love and appreciation for the natural world and motivated him to graduate from Evergreen State College in Washington with a degree in Land Use Planning. Joining Vital Ground in October, Tanner brings this depth of experience and an inspiring passion for conservation to our staff.

"I'm excited to work for a mission-driven organization that cares deeply about the spaces I call home," Tanner says. "I feel very fortunate to be a part of this community and look forward to working with Vital Ground."

Meanwhile, Chelsea may well be the next person you talk to when you visit or call Vital Ground's office. As Administrative & Finance Assistant, Chelsea will support Vital Ground's day-to-day operations and donor services.

Born and raised in Montana, Chelsea brings great insight from years as a seasonal wildlife technician, assisting on projects with bighorn sheep, marbled murrelets, northern red-legged frogs and more. She earned a bachelor's in environmental science with a biology minor from the University of Oregon in 2013. Seasonal work then took her to many incredible places, but she was always called home to Montana and returned to live near friends and family in 2022 before joining Vital Ground in November.

"Grizzly territory is some of the most stunning country in the world. I feel so lucky to call this landscape home," Chelsea says. "Now I get to work with Vital Ground and our supporters to help keep it healthy and intact. I'm happy to be here!"

Join the Wild Bear Adventure of a Lifetime

Matt Hart

Spots remain open for Vital Ground's next trip to ***Knight Inlet Lodge*** *along British Columbia's coastal Great Bear Rainforest. Don't miss out!*

- ***When****: October 15-20, 2024*
- ***Where****: Knight Inlet Lodge, an Indigenous-owned ecotourism lodge specializing in bear viewing. Learn more about the lodge at grizzlytours.com*
- ***For more information*** *and to reserve your place: Contact Kim Davitt, Development Director, at (406) 549-8650 or kdavitt@vitalground.org*

Kodiak and Zac Efron Keep It Wild Again to Help Grizzlies

You may know him better as a musical heartthrob, but since actor Zac Efron signed on as Chief Brand Officer for Kodiak (formerly Kodiak Cakes) last year, he's become a bona fide conservationist, helping grizzlies and the countless species that share their range to great effect.

With Efron sounding the conservation call, Vital Ground's longtime partnership with Kodiak led to a another highly successful Keep It Wild campaign in 2023 as Kodiak donated 100 percent of the campaign's proceeds—totaling over $100,000—to our habitat protection efforts. That made a major difference in several projects crossing the finish line, not to mention spurring a serious social media splash bringing new followers and supporters to Vital Ground's community.

"Here at Camp Kodiak we believe in keeping it wild, but safety is the name of the game," Efron says to open the launch video to this year's campaign, which you can find on Kodiak's YouTube channel. "So when we heard the safety of our bear population was in jeopardy, we knew we had to act. That's why this summer, Camp Kodiak has teamed up with Vital Ground to help conserve bear habitat." Next, Efron shows campers a map of the Lower 48 states' six grizzly bear recovery zones and explains that while Vital Ground has already protected significant habitat, the grizzly's wild strongholds remain unconnected. (In other words, Zac Efron explained our One Landscape Initiative. No big deal!)

After conducting a buddy check and showing off the items in this year's merchandise collection—a retro raglan tee, throwback Igloo cooler and vintage bear towel—Zac reminds everyone that all proceeds from Keep It Wild go toward protecting bear habitat.

Meanwhile, Efron isn't the only talented artist helping advance the cause. Alaskan bear guide and wildlife photographer Brooke Bartleson designed this year's Keep It Wild merchandise, giving several of her spectacular images of wild bears retro styling to fit the campy vibe.

"Help me protect bears and look great while doing it," Bartleson wrote on her popular Instagram page. "The best part is, 100% of Kodiak's Keep It Wild sales will go directly to Vital Ground, an incredible organization dedicated to protecting the land that bears depend on ... Together we can help protect bears in the name of all things wild!!"

It adds up to one of Vital Ground's most uniquely fun and fruitful partnerships in the name of habitat conservation. A huge thank you to Zac, Brooke and our conservation teammates at Kodiak for keeping it wild—and stylish—on behalf of bears!

VALUABLE AND VULNERABLE

A U.S. SUPREME COURT DECISION COMPOUNDS THE NEED TO PROTECT WETLANDS

Linda Lantzy

By Kayla Heinze

Far north, near the top of Idaho's Panhandle, lie two important wetlands sites. One, the effort of over 20 years of conservation efforts, is Vital Ground's Bismark Meadows project (pictured above). At 1,100 acres, these are permanently protected spring feeding grounds for grizzlies and year-round habitat for all kinds of wildlife in a place experiencing intense development pressures from the nearby vacation destination of Priest Lake. The other notable wetland in the region was the catalyst for a recent Supreme Court decision, one that will have a lasting impact on wetlands nationwide.

In late May, the Supreme Court ruled that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) does not have the authority to regulate certain wetlands under the Clean Water Act—specifically, any lacking a "continuous surface connection" to other bodies of water. The case against the EPA was brought by an Idaho couple looking to build on a "soggy" lot just a handful of miles from Bismark Meadows. According to some environmental lawyers, it will open up the possibility for "pollution without penalty" for these kinds of wetlands.

It will take time to fully grasp the on-the-ground effects of this decision. The Montana Wetland Council wrote in response, "It's more important than ever to publicly recognize, highlight, and understand the importance of wetlands." Spreading awareness about the unique and powerful role these ecosystems play in contexts both local and global can help us appreciate all we have to gain, or lose, when it comes to wetland conservation.

WHY WETLANDS MATTER

At Vital Ground, our focus centers on the mighty grizzly, a creature important both ecologically and culturally. In the spring, wetlands are especially critical for grizzlies, as they provide early-season plant foods for bears before other sources are readily available. Throughout their active months, bears utilize these lands near water for food, shelter, and as movement corridors. Bears' dependence on wetlands means that the loss of these habitats has contributed to their population declines.

Wetlands are productive and rich ecosystems, "comparable to rain forests and coral reefs," according to the EPA. Beyond bears, their varying hydrology allows them to accommodate a vast diversity of both land- and

water-dwelling species, including some that exclusively make their homes in wetland areas. Montana's Species of Concern list mentions many threatened plants and animals that are reliant on wetlands. Rare, native wildflowers like Pale-yellow jewelweed, Mealy primrose, and Kalm's lobelia all frequently set their roots in wetland soils. Animals ranging from the tiny Northern bog lemming to birds like the American bittern and reptiles like the Smooth greensnake also call these watery habitats home and suffer from their disturbance or disappearance.

At Bismark Meadows, at least 13 rare plants have been documented. Closer to our homebase in Missoula, wetlands at our Donovan Creek conservation easement provide habitat for great blue herons, fishers, Western toads, numerous owl and bat species, as well as threatened native pollinators, other insects and more. Observing their astonishing ability to support a wide diversity of life, it becomes clear why wetlands matter. But they have much to offer humans, too. Their ecosystem contributions have always been valuable but are increasingly so as our human species grapples with the compounding impacts of climate change.

WETLANDS IN A WARMING WORLD

Wetland conservation presents a bit of a paradox. The very phenomena that threaten their existence are often the same occurrences they can help prevent. In this way, these habitats are an ally in their own restoration and in our broader work to build back flourishing and healthy ecosystems.

For example, wetlands capture carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Lush with life, and in some cases serving as ancient stores of plant matter, they are remarkably effective carbon sinks. The ecosystem services don't stop there. Wetlands regulate water flow and quality. Excellent at filtering out pollutants and mitigating both drought and flood conditions, they are incredibly useful features on the landscape.

But hydrologic extremes, excess pollution, severe weather, invasive species and unrestrained development also pose significant problems for wetlands. Even as wetlands draw down greenhouse gasses, the warming temperatures caused by those emissions are creating

A Smooth greensnake (*Opheodrys vernalis*), one of many sensitive plant and animal species found on wetland grizzly habitat protected by Vital Ground across the Northern Rockies. (Photo by Lorie Shaull on Flickr)

a storm of impacts that threaten wetlands both locally and globally. As these pressures accelerate, protecting and restoring wetlands becomes even more vital to our collective wellbeing.

CONSERVING WETLANDS

According to the Montana Wetland Council, 60 percent of the state's at-risk native species use wetlands during at least one of their life stages. Over a year since we completed our workI'm n to secure Bismark Meadows for wildlife, I can only imagine how many of these creatures have made use of the habitat by now.

In fact, many Vital Ground conservation areas include wetlands. From riparian corridors along rivers and streams to marshy valley bottoms and rare forested wetlands, your support of grizzly conservation is aiding the protection of these important habitats that benefit countless species, including our own. Your support of Vital Ground ensures these essential, watery features remain on the landscape providing their myriad services. In this era of extreme weather and both ecological and political unpredictability, we can't thank you enough for your help keeping wetlands wild and undeveloped for future generations of wildlife and people.

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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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