VITALNEWS

ONE LANDSCAPE FOR WILDLIFE AND PEOPLE

NEW WINS FOR WILDLIFE, AND THE LOSS OF AN ICON

Amid an October buzzing with the noise of human politics, an accident along a Wyoming highway dealt the world's wildlife supporters a somber reason for perspective and pause. Grizzly 399, one of Earth's most famous wild animals, was struck and killed by a vehicle, ending an astonishing and inspiring 28-year life.

While all of us at Vital Ground mourn the loss of a remarkable ambassador for her species *(read more on p. 5)*, the work to ensure a safer, more durable future for all grizzlies goes on. Thanks to supporters like you, this fall saw Vital Ground's impact extend across grizzly country in new and significant ways. In October, your contributions and our project partners at the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative enabled the protection of key acres in a habitat corridor connecting mountain ranges north of Missoula *(p. 3)*. And from Wyoming to Washington, countless bears and people stayed safer thanks to new conflict prevention partnerships *(p. 6)*, including our first boots-on-the-ground mitigation efforts in the North Cascades. Thank you for reading and supporting our work for wildlife!

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Photo: 399 and cubs, by Chrissy Shammas

VITAL GROUND
FOUNDATION

For Grizzlies and People, It's All About Relationships

Without specifically setting out to, this issue of Vital News serves as a study in diverse relationships between people and grizzlies. A special tribute to Grizzly 399 *(p. 5)* illustrates how a charismatic wild bear with the right demeanor can create an enthusiastic following of wildlife lovers around the world. This remarkably adaptable bear demonstrated how a grizzly can make a living in an ecosystem fraught with conflict opportunities for nearly three decades, but she also showed the potential consequences of a single mistake. That memorial leads to a summary of the broad investments Vital Ground is making this year—from Greater Yellowstone to the North Cascades—to sustain community-based efforts that strive for positive relationships with grizzly bears by proactively heading off conflicts between people and wildlife *(p. 6)*. Later, longtime Vital Ground trustee and career bear researcher John Hechtel offers a seasoned perspective on humans' relating to grizzlies via viewing and bear-based tourism *(p. 15)*.

Finally, if you are a reader who would like to explore the nontraditional but genuinely authentic lifepaths that brought forth the founding of Vital Ground, we are excited to announce "The Grizzlies and Us", a memoir from Lynne Seus collecting the history, adventures and highlights of a life dedicated to wild creatures *(p. 9)*. Vital Ground often credits Bart the Bear and Bart II as being the original ambassadors for wild grizzlies. Their work and the passionate lives of Doug and Lynne Seus reached through film screens to spark amazement, interest and concern for grizzlies from diverse audiences, the vast majority of which may never actually see a wild grizzly bear with their own eyes.

To honor the unique relationships between the Seuses and those two special grizzly bears, Vital Ground's board and staff loyally steward the conservation vision they sparked: to create a permanently connected landscape ensuring the long-term survival of grizzly bears and the many species that share their range. Attaining that vision and ensuring that grizzlies become an enduring, self-sustaining part of our landscapes will require that our own relationships with the species continue to evolve. It will require respect for the fact that each person's relationship to bears and their habitat is also unique. A rancher on Montana's Rocky Mountain Front makes their livelihood alongside grizzly bears in a much different way than a professional photographer or wildlife tourism guide in Greater Yellowstone. An elk hunter along the Teton Front in Wyoming has a very different relationship with grizzlies than a family from Virginia visiting Glacier National Park and seeing their first bear along the Hidden Lake Trail. Each can deeply appreciate that grizzlies persist on lands they hold dear, but a singular, broad-brush approach to managing the species will not fit the needs of those diverse interests—and it certainly won't be to the benefit of the bears themselves.

Vital Ground's base of dedicated conservation supporters spans that diversity of motivations, but each of you makes a lasting positive impact on the future of grizzlies and the landscapes they traverse. Whether the topic is an update to the statewide grizzly bear management plan of your choice or a comment opportunity on reintroduction proposals for the North Cascades or Bitterroots, I encourage you to stay engaged and make sure your voice is heard!

Warm wishes,

Ryan Lutey, Executive Director

KEY ACRES PROTECTED

WHERE MOUNTAIN RANGES TOUCH

VITAL GROUND AND Y2Y CONSERVE EVARO CANYON CORRIDOR NORTH OF MISSOULA

The Evaro Canyon project site overlooks U.S. Highway 93, the Missoula Valley and the Bitterroot Mountains beyond it. With a new land purchase in the canyon this fall, Vital Ground and the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y) conserved a key "pinch point" for grizzlies and other wildlife on the edge of Missoula's growing human footprint.

By Matt Hart

Grizzly bears and other wildlife navigate a changing landscape full of roadblocks in western Montana. That's especially true in the valleys around Missoula, where increasing development pressures come face-to-face with established habitat corridors that connect mountain ranges. But bears and countless other species will benefit from a newly-protected piece of open land in a key movement area linking the Rattlesnake and Ninemile Mountains after Vital Ground and the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y) completed the purchase of 55 acres in Evaro Canyon.

The steep, forested property just east of U.S. Highway 93 sees heavy traffic from wildlife moving between the Rattlesnake and Ninemile ranges, including grizzlies. Bordering U.S. Forest Service and railroad-owned lands, the property faced the threat of subdivision and development that would create a significant conflict risk for bears and other wildlife.

"That area is a pinch point where mountain range touches mountain range," said Jamie Jonkel, Wildlife Management Specialist for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. "Going east to west, the natural flow of wildlife movement goes right through that area. It's a heavily used migration trail by elk, moose, bears, mountain lions, you name it... We've had multiple grizzlies show up in that area, and with so much grizzly activity in the Ninemile, I know they come through that stretch."

The site serves as part of a geographic funnel into nearby Marent Gulch, a location where animals frequently cross Highway 93 and move into the Reservation Divide area and the Ninemile Range. Among the grizzly bears that Jonkel and other biologists have documented in the corridor, the wide-roaming bear known as Ethyl crossed Evaro Canyon during her famed thousand-mile walkabout through Montana and Idaho a decade ago.

With the Rattlesnake Mountains forming the southern toe of the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE) that includes Glacier National Park, and the Ninemile Range serving as a connection point to the Bitterroot

and Cabinet-Yaak ecosystems, the project protects a modest acreage with outsized significance for regional wildlife connectivity.

"We're grateful people and partners came together quickly to ensure this 55-acre property, situated in a critical wildlife corridor, is protected," said Jordan Reeves, Director of Landscape Connectivity for Y2Y. "Standing on the land, it's easy to see why. Two expanses of wilderness funnel here, each one extending out into western Montana and northern Idaho. This valuable corridor also sits very close to the Bitterroot Mountains, just across Interstate 90, making the goal of reconnecting the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem to the Bitterroot Range that much closer."

Yellow dot shows the location of the Evaro Canyon Project in the larger context of grizzly connectivity.

Establishing more secure linkages between ecosystems is especially vital for grizzlies. While the NCDE hosts the Lower 48's largest population of the species at roughly 1,000 bears, the Cabinet-Yaak is home to just 50-60 grizzlies and the Bitterroot does not contain a resident population of the bears despite serving as a federally-designated grizzly bear recovery zone. Biologists and conservationists across many agencies and organizations consider genetic connectivity between grizzly populations to be essential for the species' long-term survival in the Lower 48.

As a result, Evaro Canyon was one of several dozen priority areas that over 60 federal, tribal, state and independent biologists prioritized for habitat protection when Vital Ground completed its rigorous conservation strategy and launched the One Landscape Initiative in 2019. With dozens of high-priority projects and partnerships now completed, One Landscape continues to protect key habitat linkages on private lands across western Montana and northern Idaho.

In addition to helping connect designated grizzly bear recovery zones, the Evaro Canyon project site is a well-documented movement area for moose, elk, black bears, mountain lions and much more. (Photo: Paul Lueders)

"These micro sites that are private that connect forestland to forestland are key," said Jonkel. "They're not glamorous, but they're very, very important. It's preserving linkage into perpetuity as Montana's getting built up so quickly."

Following last month's purchase, Vital Ground will own and manage the property to maximize its habitat value for diverse wildlife. Beyond partnership with Y2Y, additional support for the Evaro Canyon project came from the Heart of the Rockies Initiative's Keep It Connected program and individual supporters like you. Thank you!

Nicknamed the Matriarch of the Tetons, Grizzly 399 was a prolific mother, successfully raising four cubs in one of her last litters, a rare feat for any bear. (Photo: Evan Watts)

Honoring the Conservation Legacy of Grizzly 399

By Kayla Heinze

Conservation work often strategizes around the well-being of an entire species, ecosystem or region but many of us devote ourselves to these efforts because we believe in the inherent value of each unique life present on this planet. Earlier this month, the world lost the impressive and singular life of Grizzly 399, an icon of grizzlies and the oldest known reproducing female in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE), to a vehicle collision.

Collectively, our Vital Ground team feels great sorrow at her death, knowing it is a loss to our Earth of a truly remarkable individual who will never be duplicated. Reflecting on 399's legacy as a genetic matriarch with 18 known offspring, we marvel at her impact as a gateway into the natural world for visitors to Grand Teton National Park, as well as countless internet fans whom she drew into learning about wildlife and conservation more deeply. Grizzly 399 allowed many to glimpse her wildness with wonder, teaching people about the resiliency and sensitivity of bears. She helped us better understand what existence for bears is really like, so we could remember in a concrete way that each individual life is a great and miraculous force.

Sadly, her end is not an uncommon occurrence, as many bears, mostly unknown and unnamed by humans, are also killed in conflicts and collisions involving people. Roadways and associated infrastructure present obstructions to the natural movement of wildlife. This fragmentation is a defining part of bears' reality across the West's modern, rapidly-changing landscapes. Even the famous 399, who overcame many challenges of survival to make it through her 28 years, could not ultimately escape the far-reaching impact of development.

Luckily, embodying 399's intelligence and adaptability, the conservation community can continue our work towards a future of coexistence. Thanks to supporters like you, we can protect more habitat and promote connectivity across shared landscapes, helping the species and ecosystems we cherish and the individual animals we love.

Vital Ground will celebrate and carry forward Grizzly 399's legacy through our work to connect landscapes and prevent conflicts in the GYE and beyond. While we grieve for this great bear to whom many felt a personal connection after following her journey for so long, we will do all we can to ensure our region is a place where other precious and singular lives—of people, grizzlies and countless other critters—can thrive together.

Protect habitat and honor 399's legacy with a memorial gift: ***give.vitalground.org/grizzly399***

PUTTING SAFETY INTO PRACTICE

VITAL GROUND FUNDS 18 CONFLICT PREVENTION PARTNERS ACROSS GRIZZLY COUNTRY

With Vital Ground support, a range rider program in Montana's Centennial Valley helps keep livestock and predators from crossing paths. (Photo: Centennial Valley Association)

By Matt Hart

As the seasonal calendar turns to fall every year, grizzly bears' internal calendars have them urgently preparing for winter. Every autumn, bears enter hyperphagia, a biological state of intense hunger in which their bodies literally turn off the neurological process for feeling full. That means bears are constantly searching for a meal, loading as many calories as possible in preparation for denning.

When their searching leads them near people and their properties, it takes diligence to prevent trouble for everyone.

As an organization dedicated to the long-term conservation of grizzly bears in the Lower 48 states, Vital Ground is in the business of helping people prevent conflicts with bears, whether in the backyard, backcountry or on working landscapes. In addition to directly protecting habitat, Vital Ground supports coexistence projects by local groups and agencies across grizzly country. This fall, 18 partners have been working hard in crucial locations to help bears and people stay safe.

PREPARING THE FRONTIERS OF GRIZZLY RANGE

Earlier this year, grizzly bear conservation reached a landmark moment with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife and National Park services announcing their plan to slowly reintroduce a grizzly population to the North Cascades Ecosystem of Washington state. After their absence from the area for most of the last century, grizzlies returning to their historic range in the Cascades will have help staying out of trouble with people.

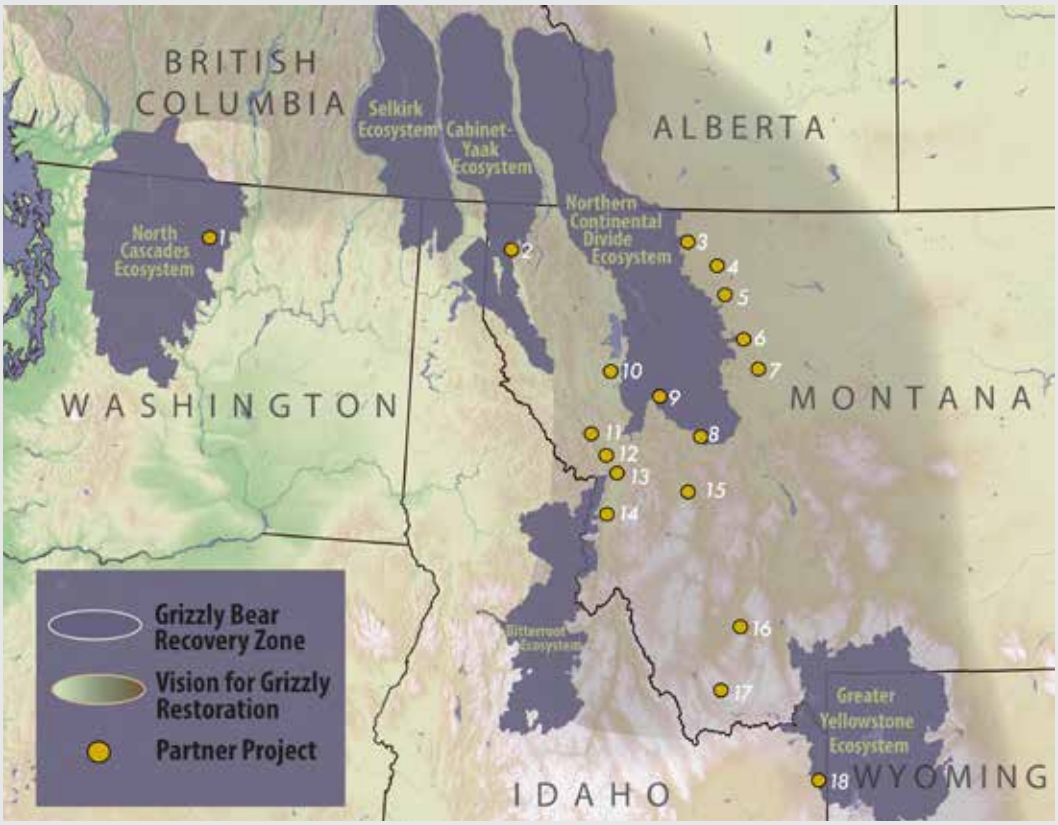
Vital Ground has previously supported educational efforts to further public awareness of the grizzly's history in the North Cascades, but 2024 marks our first partnership directly supporting conflict prevention for bears in the ecosystem. We're proud to back the **Methow Conservancy** in their efforts to prepare communities along the eastern edge of the range for grizzlies' presence through an electric fencing pilot program and bear-resistant dumpster installation.

Two hundred miles east of the Cascades, grizzlies in the Cabinet-Yaak area of Northwest Montana represent the species' smallest current population in the Lower 48.

Without a national park or large wilderness area to anchor habitat protections, coexistence efforts and bear awareness by people are crucial to the survival of these grizzlies. Each fall, the community of Troy rallies in the name of bear safety at the **Troy Apple Festival**, with Vital Ground supporting this local event that includes bear-aware education booths and an apple gleaning station for the popular backyard attractant.

Another hundred miles east from the Cabinet-Yaak is the Blackfeet Nation, where bears range out of the habitat stronghold of Glacier National Park and tribal members continue to lead a time-tested relationship of coexistence with the species. With tourism pressures growing, new partnerships can further the cause as Vital Ground supports the **Glacier-Two Medicine Alliance** in leading several bear-aware events and providing bear safety packets for vacation rentals and businesses. An additional partnership with the USDA's **NRCS and Pheasants Forever** helps equip landowners in the area with electric fencing and electric drive-over bear mats.

South and east of the Blackfeet Nation, on the opposite side of grizzly country from the North Cascades, grizzly bears are venturing farther onto historic prairie range than they have in a century. Three partnerships across the agricultural lands and communities of the Rocky Mountain Front region help these pioneering bears and people stay safe. The **Conservation Science Collaborative** leads a range rider program monitoring bear and other predator movements through ranchlands, while **Bear Smart Choteau** holds a fall bear-aware community event and the **Sun River Watershed Group** supplies bear spray training materials for six different community events along the Front.



2024 CONSERVATION PARTNERS: 1. Methow Conservancy: Electric fencing and bear-resistant dumpster 2. Troy Apple Festival: Public bear-aware education event 3. Glacier-Two Medicine Alliance: Education and outreach events, VRBO information packet 4. NRCS and Pheasants Forever: Electric fencing and bear mats 5. Conservation Science Collaborative: Range rider program 6. Teton Bear Smart: Community bear-aware event 7. Sun River Watershed Group: Bear safety resources for six community events 8. Blackfoot Challenge: Electric fencing for hotspot ranches 9. Clearwater Valley Bear Smart: Hazard assessment and public education 10. Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes: Fall fruit gleaning and wildlife festival 11. Bear Smart Alberton: Electric fencing and bear-resistant garbage containers 12. Great Bear Foundation: Missoula, Ninemile and Bitterroot apple pickup programs 13. Be Bear Aware: Educational trailer for community events 14. Wind River Bear Institute: Karelian bear dog incident response team 15. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks: Upper Clark Fork livestock carcass removal program 16. People and Carnivores: Madison Valley bear-aware toolkits 17. Centennial Valley Association: Range rider program 18. Teton Regional Land Trust: Conservation easement near Island Park.

SAFETY AND CONNECTIVITY FOR YELLOWSTONE

Grizzlies moving south from the Glacier-Bob Marshall wilderness complex face a patchwork of roads, ranches and mountain ranges separating the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE) from the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE), where the grizzly bear population remains genetically isolated from others. As bears continue to move through these connectivity zones in the southern NCDE and southwestern Montana, our conflict prevention

partnerships increase their chances of survival and successful dispersal.

In Montana's Blackfoot Valley, Vital Ground supports our longtime partners at the **Blackfoot Challenge** with their electric fencing program for ranches in conflict hotspots. In the nearby Seeley Lake area, **Clearwater Valley Bear Smart** continues its community safety effort by identifying hazards and containment strategies for local businesses. And on the other side of the Mission Mountains, the **Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes** run a fall fruit gleaning program and a community wildlife festival in the Mission Valley.

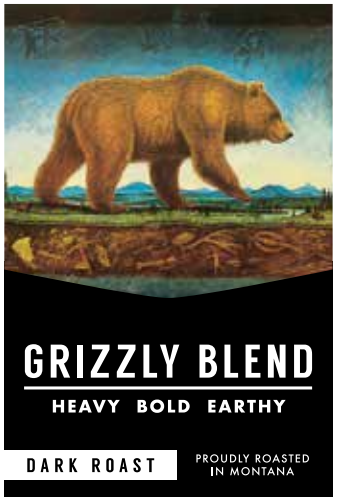
Farther south, landowners outside of Missoula can help bears move safely with assistance from the **Great Bear Foundation** and their apple pickup programs in the Missoula, Ninemile and Bitterroot valleys. The **Wind River Bear Institute** also provides a key resource in the Missoula and Bitterroot valleys: Karelian bear dogs that respond to incidents with a trained biologist, helping identify attractants and scare bears away from developed areas. Based in Missoula, the **Be Bear Aware** educational trailer travels to community events around western Montana and northern Idaho, with a new video project seeking to broaden public understanding of responsible bear safety.

East of the Bitterroots lie the broad rangelands and valleys bridging the habitat gap to Yellowstone. In the Upper Clark Fork Valley, Vital Ground is helping **Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks** continue their new, highly-successful livestock carcass removal program that allows ranchers to quickly remove a major bear attractant from the landscape. Farther south, in the Madison Valley on the edge of the GYE, our longtime partners at **People and Carnivores** are responding to increased tourism with a crucial bear-aware toolkit for vacation rentals, restaurants and homeowners.

Due west of Yellowstone National Park, grizzlies are moving through the Centennial Valley toward the wilds of central Idaho in increasing numbers. The **Centennial Valley Association** helps these bears and the ranches that they cross coexist through a robust range rider program.

Lastly, Vital Ground's southernmost partnership of 2024 helps directly protect rich grizzly habitat in the GYE's southwestern buffer zone. Near the conflict hotspot of Island Park, Idaho, the **Teton Regional Land Trust** will conserve a 320-acre private inholding in Caribou-Targhee National Forest 10 miles west of the national park boundary, with a new conservation easement ensuring connected habitat for grizzlies and countless other wildlife species.

From the southern outskirts of Yellowstone to the new frontier of the North Cascades, Vital Ground supporters like you are enabling conflict prevention in the places where grizzlies need it most, as our partnerships continue to follow the geographic priorities of our One Landscape Initiative. We couldn't fund these crucial community-led efforts without our own contributors like you. Thank you for all you do to help keep bears and people safe!



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Support wildlife and order online at: ***www.coffeetraders.com***

Grizzly Blend logo art by Monte Dolack

"The Grizzlies and Us": Lynne Seus Shares New Memoir

By Matt Hart

"You can't just go rescue grizzly bears and turn them into movie stars."

That was the refrain friends and family echoed to Doug and Lynne Seus in the 1970s. Fifty years later, all of us at Vital Ground are sure glad they didn't let it stop them.

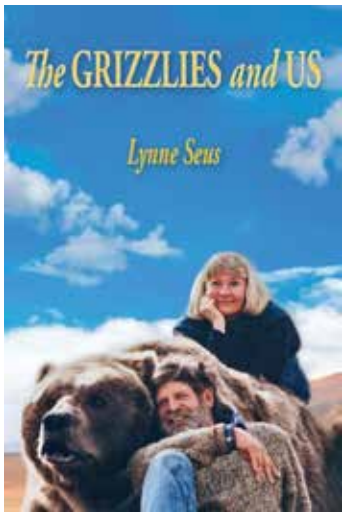
The Seuses adopted Bart the Bear in 1977 as an infant cub born in captivity. Two years earlier, wild grizzlies had been listed under the federal Endangered Species Act, their numbers in the Lower 48 dwindling to 500 from an estimated 50,000 that once roamed the contiguous United States. As the grizzly's recovery began, so did the Seuses' life with their own adopted bears. Before long, the two stories would become forever intertwined.

Alongside Lynne, Vital Ground is honored to share the extraordinary Seus story in new depth this year. Lynne's memoir, "The Grizzlies and Us", is now available in hardback from our online Bear Mart, with all profits supporting Vital Ground's conservation work.

"The lives of these beloved grizzlies had to matter for something more than movies," Lynne writes of the fateful decision she and Doug made to launch Vital Ground in 1990. By then, Bart had grown from a 5-pound fuzzball into a 1,500-pound icon, starring in dozens of films and television titles. As his partnership with Doug, his primary trainer, grew into one of history's most fascinating, boundary-breaking examples of an interspecies relationship, Lynne kept pace every step of the way, from film sets in Italy and New Zealand to their ever-growing home in Heber City, Utah. With three human children and many more animals alongside—wolves, foxes, raccoons and a badger, to name a handful—Lynne's is a mother's story few could imagine, let alone live.

Thankfully, we can all join the ride now. "The Grizzlies and Us" invites us along for all the heartfelt highs and lows of the Seuses' unparalleled journey. Authentically hilarious and deeply moving from one page to the next, it's a delightful read, full of newly-unearthed joys even for those familiar with the history of Vital Ground and the Seuses.

For those new to the party: Get ready for an adventure and a testament to the undimmed human—and grizzly—spirit that you truly have to read to believe.



Author, conservationist and longtime friend of Vital Ground Rick Bass says it best: "To read 'The Grizzlies and Us' is to peer more closely into old lessons of respect, humility, creativity, passion, and a fuller understanding of how brightly we the living, connected by intimacy of deep knowledge, can burn."

Just as extraordinary as their animal training careers, the Seuses' reciprocity for all things wild is a big part of this tale. Beginning with the moment on a movie set when Doug and Lynne first had the idea to start a grizzly conservation group, the growth of our organization accompanies the growth of Bart and his successors—Tank, Honey Bump and Bart II—in the book's flowing narrative.

Vital Ground has now helped protect and enhance more than 1 million acres of grizzly bear habitat, while the species has roughly quadrupled its numbers in the Lower 48 since the day Bart was born. The journey is far from over, however, with development pressures higher than ever and habitat fragmentation continuing to threaten the Great Bear's long-term future in the Northern Rockies.

That's where you come in! In keeping with her lifetime of generosity, Lynne will donate all profits from "The Grizzlies and Us" back to Vital Ground to help us meet wild grizzlies' urgent need for habitat protection and conflict prevention. Buying a copy from Vital Ground's Bear Mart will be a gift that keeps giving as you enjoy Lynne's amazing story—and storytelling—while knowing your support is making a difference for wild grizzlies, today and for generations of bears to come.

Order a copy of "The Grizzlies and Us" and shop other holiday gift ideas at ***vitalground.org/shop***

Kodiak, Efron Keep it Wild with Campaign to Protect Habitat

Healthy, nutrient-rich breakfasts and healthy, wildlife-rich landscapes: sounds like a match made in heaven, right? Or at least one made in the Rocky Mountains, where longtime conservation champion Kodiak has once again teamed up with Vital Ground on their annual Keep It Wild campaign to protect key habitat in grizzly bear country.

A Vital Ground partner since its early days in 2017, Kodiak's conservation impact has grown alongside its brand. Based in Park City, Utah, Kodiak is now a regular on grocery shelves and in backpacks worldwide. For the last three years, the Keep It Wild campaigns have offered limited-edition outdoor gear and merchandise alongside Kodiak's famous breakfast staples, with all proceeds benefiting Vital Ground's mission.

And they've done it with some major star power helping spread the word.

"Kodiak continues to stay true to its mission of feeding epic days and wilder lives while making sure to inspire people to get outside and leave the world better than they found it," said actor Zac Efron, Kodiak's Chief Brand Officer. "Programs like Keep It Wild are a huge part of why I became a part of the Kodiak brand, and I'm so excited to see the impact of this year's campaign."

In addition to Efron helping launch this year's campaign via his popular Instagram channel, the push to protect habitat featured sustainably-designed outdoor gear and merchandise from the brands Cotopaxi and Yeti—everything from versatile daypacks and lunchboxes to hats, t-shirts and water bottles. A few of the limited-edition items are still available for online purchase today at *kodiakcakes.com/collections/keepitwild*, with 100 percent of proceeds benefiting grizzly conservation.

"Here at Kodiak, we're always encouraging folks to enjoy the great outdoors while living epic days and wilder lives. This year's Keep It Wild campaign is a direct reflection of our mission and values," said Cory Bayers, Chief Marketing Officer of Kodiak. "By working together with incredible brands like Cotopaxi and Yeti, and contributing to The Vital Ground Foundation, we encourage consumers to get outside while also educating on the importance of land conservation and bear protection."

Vital Ground's partnership with Kodiak has advanced numerous conservation projects protecting thousands of acres over the past seven years. Thousands more are on tap as Vital Ground pursues some of our largest habitat protection projects ever in the next year. It adds up to Kodiak leaving a tangible and sizeable impact on wild landscapes, a legacy that will last far longer than any piece of gear or pantry item.

Vital Ground Welcomes Back Trustee Meggen Arthur-Wilson

Supporters like you keep Vital Ground's conservation work moving urgently forward, but we also love a good reunion. Our Board of Trustees provides the foundational guidance and support that launches our efforts, and we're thrilled to see it grow once again this year with the return of Meggen Arthur-Wilson.

A longtime friend and supporter of Vital Ground, Meggen previously served as a Trustee from 2011-2018. With expertise and experience in real estate transactions, communications, events and fundraising, we're delighted to have her enthusiastic voice return to the Board as we pursue an ambitious slate of conservation projects over the next few years.

A lifelong dedicated conservationist, Meggen is a business owner living full-time in Whitefish, Mont., with her husband of 35 years. Recently retired from a career in real estate investing, Meggen now channels her energies into her specialty food production company, where she creates premium, small-batch products that highlight local ingredients and organic practices. This close connection to the land underscores her commitment to preserving Montana's unique habitats—a commitment that will also fuel her work on the board of Vital Ground.

Meggen Arthur-Wilson

Beyond her business and conservation efforts, Meggen is deeply involved in her community. She supports numerous organizations in the Flathead Valley, including Land to Hand, All Saints Episcopal Church, the Whitefish Community Foundation, the North Valley Food Bank and the Whitefish Chamber of Commerce. Her work with these groups reflects her commitment to nurturing both the environment and the community that she loves, contributing to a future where nature and people thrive side by side. Welcome back, Meggen!

Big Bear Blend II: Collecting Vital Ground's Signature Wine

By Kim Davitt, Development Director

Last year, Vital Ground was proud to offer its first Collectors Series Signature Wine as a thank you to generous supporters of our year-end fundraising campaign. I'm excited to share that the wine will now be offered each year with a new label designed by a respected wildlife artist.

Board members Ken Hick and Cheri Cooley-Hick, owners of Script Cellars Wines, work with their winemaker, Brad Cowen, one of the Pacific Northwest's top winemakers, to create limited production boutique wines donated to nonprofits for their events and other fundraising. Their efforts, which began in 2010 in Walla Walla, Wash., continue to produce exquisite and complex wines each year that receive top ratings from wine experts around the world. Their flagship wine, Exordium, consistently earns ratings in the mid 90s from Wine Spectator, Wine Enthusiast, and other experts. Their wines have received an abundance of awards, from Best in Show at the Pacific Northwest Food and Wine Festival to Second Best Red Wine at last year's International Wine Tasting Competition in Budapest, Hungary.

Ken and Cheri are committed to donating a new Big Bear Blend for Vital Ground's year-end fundraising each year, both to share their love of great wine and to help raise funds for an organization they love and want to support. This year, Vital Ground will be offering Big Bear Blend II as an incentive for donations of $1,500 or more during our year-end campaign, with a limited production of 100 bottles. This very special Cabernet Blend will be offered in a bottle featuring the label art "Colorful Grizzly" by Sarah Stribbling (sarahstribblingwildlifeart.com) with Bart the Bear's paw print sticker on it, and it will be matched to a custom wine box with Vital Ground's logo and Bart the Bear's name and paw print on the box.

Ken Hick and Cheri Cooley-Hick

Big Bear Blend II

Ken and Cheri describe Big Bear Blend II as a 2019 Reserve Blend: 65% Cabernet Sauvignon, 15% Malbec, 10% Merlot, 10% Cabernet Franc, made from some of the best fruit in Washington's Columbia Valley. Tasting notes include scents of blackberry, cassis, tobacco, and sous-bois.

The year-end campaign will also have a $100,000 match, so we hope you will consider making a generous gift to protect grizzly bear habitat knowing that it will be doubled, and then popping the cork of Big Bear Blend II and toasting to your conservation impact!

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New Staffers: Welcome Monica Hull and Natalie Moses

As the need to conserve key grizzly habitat remains urgent, Vital Ground's team continues to grow. Helping to expand our project development and stewardship capacity, Natalie Moses joined Vital Ground in July as our Conservation Program Assistant, while Monica Hull came aboard in August as our Development Associate.

Natalie brings with her rich experience in Montana land conservation. Born and raised in Milwaukee, she spent summers and holidays 'Up North' exploring open spaces and helping out with her extended family's farm chores. Early on, she developed a love for the outdoors and a strong desire to hike, camp and generally romp around in nature admiring the plants, trees, streams, birds, butterflies and all things large and small, including bears.

Natalie moved to Colorado to obtain her Master's degree in Social Work and acquired an appreciation for the Mountain West and its wild spaces. Inspired by Vital Ground's mission, she is eager to protect grizzly habitat and all that comes with it. She savors the opportunity to build rapport and create connections with Vital Ground's landowners and partners, bringing with her three years of conservation project coordination experience from the Bitter Root Land Trust in Montana as well as seven years of land acquisition experience, 13 years as a yoga instructor and a few years as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Bulgaria.

As Conservation Program Assistant, Natalie will contribute to both the development of new habitat projects for Vital Ground and stewardship of our existing conservation properties and easements.

"Vital Ground's work and dedication to protecting grizzly bear habitat is quite amazing," says Natalie. "I'm excited to be a part of it. Protecting these landscapes and working with the people that are making this all happen is truly an honor."

If she's not in the office or out in the field, you can find Natalie walking her dog, getting dirty in her garden, enjoying a yoga practice, cooking up a meal, baking a tasty treat or heading out on an adventure with her husband from their home in Florence, Mont.

Monica Hull

Natalie Moses

Monica has lived in Montana for 15 years and brings a rich background in both business and wildlife conservation to Vital Ground. Another Wisconsinite, she earned a Business and Environmental Studies degree from the University of Wisconsin before moving West. Monica gained a decade of hands-on experience in grizzly country as a park ranger in Glacier National Park before spending several years working for an international leadership coaching company.

As a part of Vital Ground's development team, Monica will work to grow our business partners program and help build the organization's overall financial resources needed to fulfill our conservation mission.

"I'm thrilled to join an organization that not only protects grizzly bear habitat but also focuses on the local communities sharing the landscape with wildlife," Monica says. "Vital Ground's work will be a legacy for generations to come. I couldn't be happier to be a part of it."

Like Natalie, Monica grew up exploring the Northwoods of Wisconsin, where her love for the outdoors began. After college, she moved to Montana to pursue her dream of working in the mountains and helping to conserve wild places. She now explores all corners of Montana while backpacking, snowboarding, hunting and fishing, and also enjoys traveling, cooking and a good round of karaoke. Monica and her husband live in St. Ignatius, Mont., maintaining their small property and adventuring outdoors every chance they get.

Join us in giving a griz-sized welcome to both Natalie and Monica!

BEYOND FAT BEAR WEEK

ASSESSING THE STATE OF BEAR TOURISM WITH AN ALASKAN BIOLOGIST

Alaska's Katmai National Park and Preserve is home to around 2,200 brown bears, most of whom never get famous or make it onto a webcam. (Photo: Larry Aumiller)

By Kayla Heinze

John Hechtel remembers a time in Alaska before crowds gathered to watch brown bears at Brooks Falls in Katmai National Park and Preserve. The impressively large and increasingly famous bears now draw not only visitors from across the world, but thousands more watching virtually from home.

Since its simple beginnings in 2014, Katmai and the website Explore.org's Fat Bear Week has grown in popularity nearly as much as the animals it celebrates. At any given hour, several thousand bear fans tune in devoutly to the website's livestream and active chat. It's usually a cheery space, but this year it took a somber turn. The on-camera killing of a popular female bear by an older male prompted anguish and reflection among fans.

A longtime biologist in the state, Hechtel has worked on bear management, research and conflict prevention. Also a board member of Vital Ground, John currently serves as President of the International Association for Bear Research and Management (IBA).

"I obviously like people to be excited and to care about bears and to be interested in them," Hechtel said when we talked in the wake of Fat Bear Week. "But I think we all, myself included, tend to underestimate bears and what they're really like."

And what they're really like, according to John and others who adore these remarkable creatures, is a true wonder of wildness that cannot be fully comprehended, even after an entire lifetime of learning about them. This endless curiosity is necessary if we are going to continue sharing landscapes with bears.

GRIZZLY REALITIES

Sensational stories do well in our modern, virtual era. For bears, this usually means being slotted into one of two extreme portrayals: vicious, cold-blooded killers as seen lately in "Cocaine Bear" or cuddly-cute teddy bears as harmless as Pooh.

There are dangers to both of these mischaracterizations. The urge to view bears as cute or docile can lead to people side-stepping crucial safety practices, letting bears learn to associate people with

food rewards. It can tempt people into fixating on the creature's photogenic features over less amusing realities that grizzlies face, like the threats of human disturbance and habitat fragmentation.

John Hechtel

"Part of the problem to me is we've got people going to two extremes," John said. "Bearanoia is a problem, but on the other side they kind of ignore the impacts and potential danger, get complacent and don't think about the risks to bears and humans."

The truth of survival for wild bears defies stereotypes, as was on display more than usual during this year's Fat Bear Week. Hailed as the "darkest" iteration of the competition yet by Backpacker Magazine, first there were two longtime fan favorite bears who failed to return to the falls, then viewers witnessed a well-known older male kill and begin to eat a popular female bear on the livestream, a graphic dose of perspective that caused a temporary pause in the online voting event. While difficult to watch, Hechtel thinks this was an important glimpse of what goes on in the sometimes-harsh lives of wild bears.

"We're losing sight of [Brooks Falls] being an important place for the bears to come and put on the pounds before winter," John said.

The reality, far from the catchy headlines of Fat Bear Week, is that survival can be challenging for bears. While Katmai itself is home to one of the densest brown bear populations in the world, with around 2,200 individuals, their relatives here in the Northern Rockies face threats like habitat fragmentation in addition to the normal difficulties of life in the wild. Hechtel wishes that all the people who tuned in to the livestreams also channeled that energy into broader efforts to conserve the animals they love by supporting conservation work like Vital Ground's.

"Those of us who feel having bears is important have to do what we can to make sure they continue to live," John said. "What you really need is bears being able to move across the landscape."

THOUGHTFUL TOURISM: A BEAR NECESSITY

One way to learn about the reality of bears is to view them in the wild. But the monetization and rapid growth of the bear-viewing industry also concerns Hechtel. While he told me he thinks it's valuable to embrace the individuality of bears and connect with them on a more intimate level, he worries that the impacts of visitors at Katmai and elsewhere are understudied, overlooked and contributing to the possibility of "loving something to death."

The excitement to see bears up-close is understandable, and it is often a once-in-a-lifetime chance for visitors. Hechtel shares their enthusiasm but told me he wants to see more discussions of how to have a positive impact and be responsible wildlife viewers.

Sharing Hechtel's concern over increased bear tourism, it turns out, is the creator of Fat Bear Week himself, Michael Fitz, a former National Park Service ranger. On his natural history blog, Fitz writes of Brooks Falls, "Humans may be the river's biggest ecological wildcard... and people alter the behavior of the bears that make the scene so special. The infrastructure needed to support thousands of visitors and their recreational activities invite conflict with bears."

Responsible guides can help people be thoughtful in their tourism. When John led polar bear viewing trips to Churchill, Manitoba, he told me he always emphasized the importance of giving back to conservation so future generations could have equally awe-inspiring experiences in nature.

"I spend as much time as I possibly can trying to watch bears," John said. "If you're excited about the bears of Fat Bear Week, what I would like to see is people realizing that here's a door to a fascinating world of complexity and interesting information about these amazing creatures. You can spend the rest of your life reading about and learning about bears and barely scratch the surface."

Vital Ground's dual-pronged mission of protecting habitat for grizzlies and working with local communities and landowners to prevent conflicts is an investment in the long-term wellbeing of these wild creatures. Only if they have the space to thrive can we continue to learn about bears, experiencing the true wonder they have to offer.

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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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