THE VITAL GROUND FOUNDATION | SPRING 2025

VITAL NEWS

ONE LANDSCAPE FOR WILDLIFE AND PEOPLE

THE UNIFYING PATH OF LAND AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

At a time when seemingly every topic of public interest is swiftly and harshly polarized, conserving open space and wildlife habitat remains an objective that unites more than it divides. As the Montana State Legislature convened in early 2025, broad coalitions of citizens voiced support for public conservation programs and the land and wildlife managers who steward them. Inside the Capitol, bipartisan groups of lawmakers and stakeholders championed open space protection amid efforts to limit the durability of voluntary private land conservation.

Meanwhile, your support of habitat protection continues to result in tangible progress on the ground. Over the winter, two new conservation agreements in western Montana *(p. 4-7)* permanently protected rich habitat in key movement areas for grizzlies and much more, and partners like the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes *(p. 8-9)* have hit the ground running this spring on active conflict prevention efforts to keep bears and people safe across shared landscapes. Thank you for your support that makes this hopeful and unifying work possible!

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Photo: Meadow Creek Project, by Mitch Doherty

VITAL GROUND FOUNDATION

One Landscape: A Vision Echoed Federally, For Now

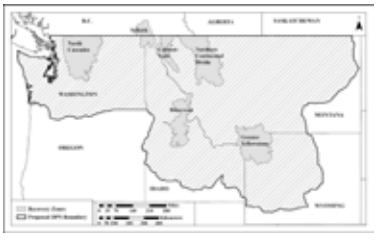
This year marks a half-century of collaboration towards recovery of the grizzly bear in the Lower 48 under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). From early in the process, the grizzly's dwindling populations were triaged in six distinct, federally-defined recovery zones where handfuls of bears tenuously persisted. But based on the species' remarkable progress since 1975, this January the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) proposed a "new and comprehensive approach" to long-term grizzly recovery under a model that includes several adjustments addressing the concerns of people living in and around landscapes where the bear is recovering.

The major takeaways from the proposed change include designating a single geographic area where Lower 48 grizzlies would be subject to ESA protection—referred to as the species' Distinct Population Segment (DPS)—as well as providing additional management flexibility for authorized agencies and individuals to resolve conflicts with grizzly bears. The proposed rule is solidly grounded in an independently peer-reviewed updated species status assessment complying with the best available scientific information to inform decision-making. If you're interested in the details of the proposal, you may be able to learn more and follow the process at: www.fws.gov/grizzlyrulemaking.*

The 2025 proposed rule change and Vital Ground's One Landscape conservation strategy—launched in 2019—are nearly lockstep in approach, as the two maps below suggest (Vital Ground's on the left, the new USFWS map showing a single DPS on the right). The One Landscape vision for sustainable recovery of the species hinges on a regionally-connected bear population promoting resilience to the challenges of continuing human encroachment into its habitat and the ongoing effects of climate change. January's USFWS rule essentially proposes the same in the form of a unified, regional "metapopulation" of grizzlies in the Lower 48. Similarly, the strategies share the understanding that a regionally-connected geographical range requires expanded support for efforts to minimize conflicts between bears and people, including both incentive-based programs and flexibility in regard to corrective measures for some bears.

Although separated by time, the similarity of the two approaches shouldn't come as a surprise. From 2017 to 2019, Vital Ground worked to secure the opinions of a broad spectrum of bear biologists and other wildlife and land managers from state, tribal and federal authorities, who established the foundational guidance that grizzly bears need both physical habitat and social acceptance to attain sustainable recovery. They also agreed that incentive-based approaches like voluntary land conservation and supporting conflict prevention on a landscape scale were key to grizzly recovery.

Subjecting the nation's 50-year recovery investment to drastic swings in management based on politics rather than science will undermine progress made by generations of bears and countless human stakeholders, potentially setting efforts back decades. Regardless of the final direction the recovery rule now takes, the science on the matter is well settled and Vital Ground will continue tirelessly working for grizzlies and other wildlife species—in partnership with you.

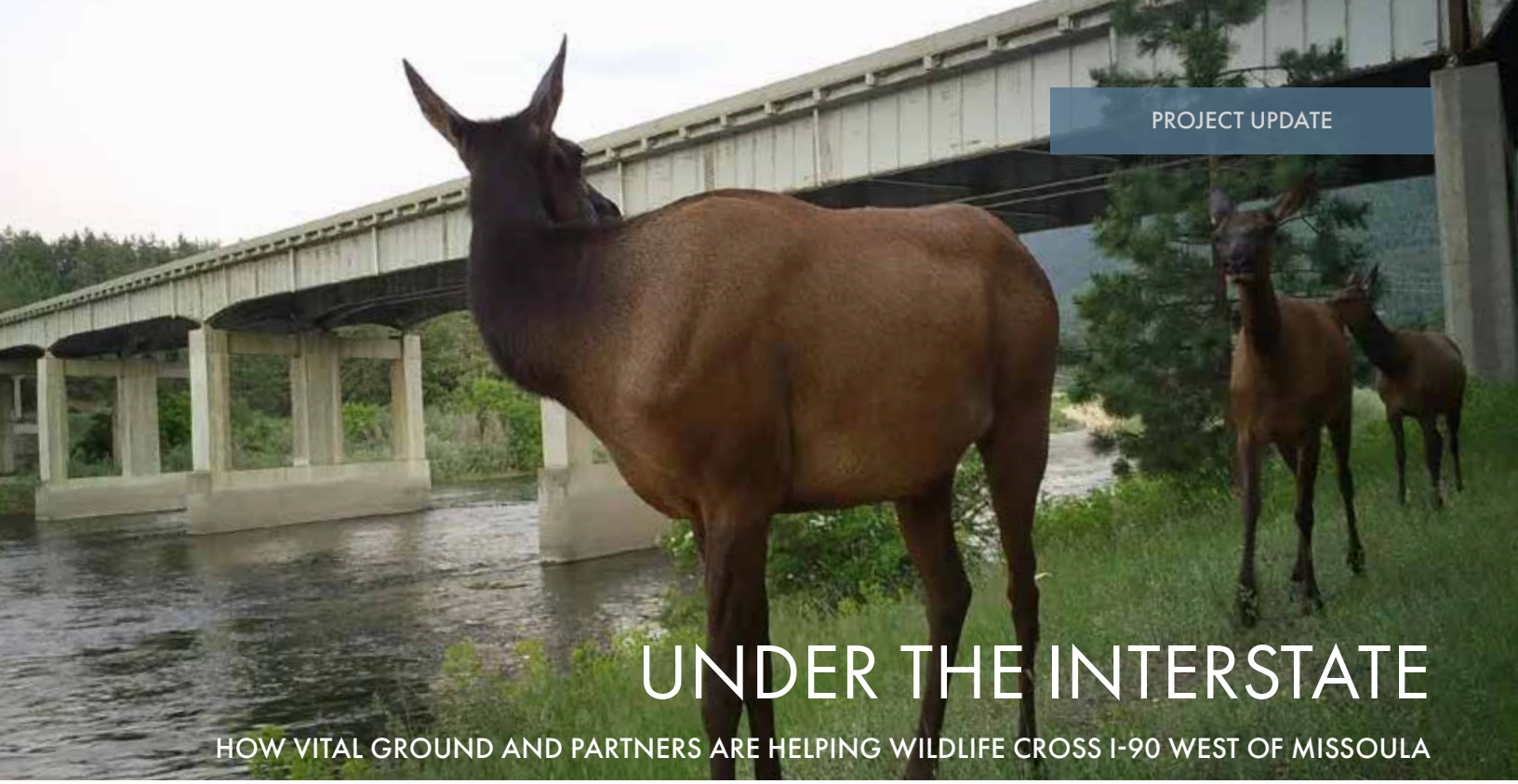


With gratitude for your support,

Ryan

Ryan Lutey, Executive Director

*Public comment on the January 2025 rule was accepted until mid-May, but the proposed update was officially archived on January 20th pursuant to the administration changeover. Additional direction is expected as changes to USFWS staffing and priorities settle out throughout the year. Documents supporting the recently proposed rule opened with the following warning: *You are viewing ARCHIVED content published online before January 20, 2025. Please note that this content is NOT UPDATED, and links may not work.*



PROJECT UPDATE

UNDER THE INTERSTATE

HOW VITAL GROUND AND PARTNERS ARE HELPING WILDLIFE CROSS I-90 WEST OF MISSOULA

Documented by a trail camera, elk and other wildlife use Vital Ground's conserved property at the confluence of Ninemile Creek and the Clark Fork River to pass under Interstate 90 west of Missoula. As part of a regional working group, we're helping advance a new wildlife crossing structure project to further improve habitat connectivity in this key area.

By Kayla Heinze

Many of us are familiar with these stretches of road: winding highways decorated with bright yellow hazard signs highlighting various species of wildlife. These roadways are hotspots for wildlife-vehicle collisions and represent one of the crucial challenges to coexistence between people and wide-ranging animals. An estimated 1 million vertebrates are killed every day on America's roads and collisions with deer, elk and moose account for some 1.8 million insurance claims each year.

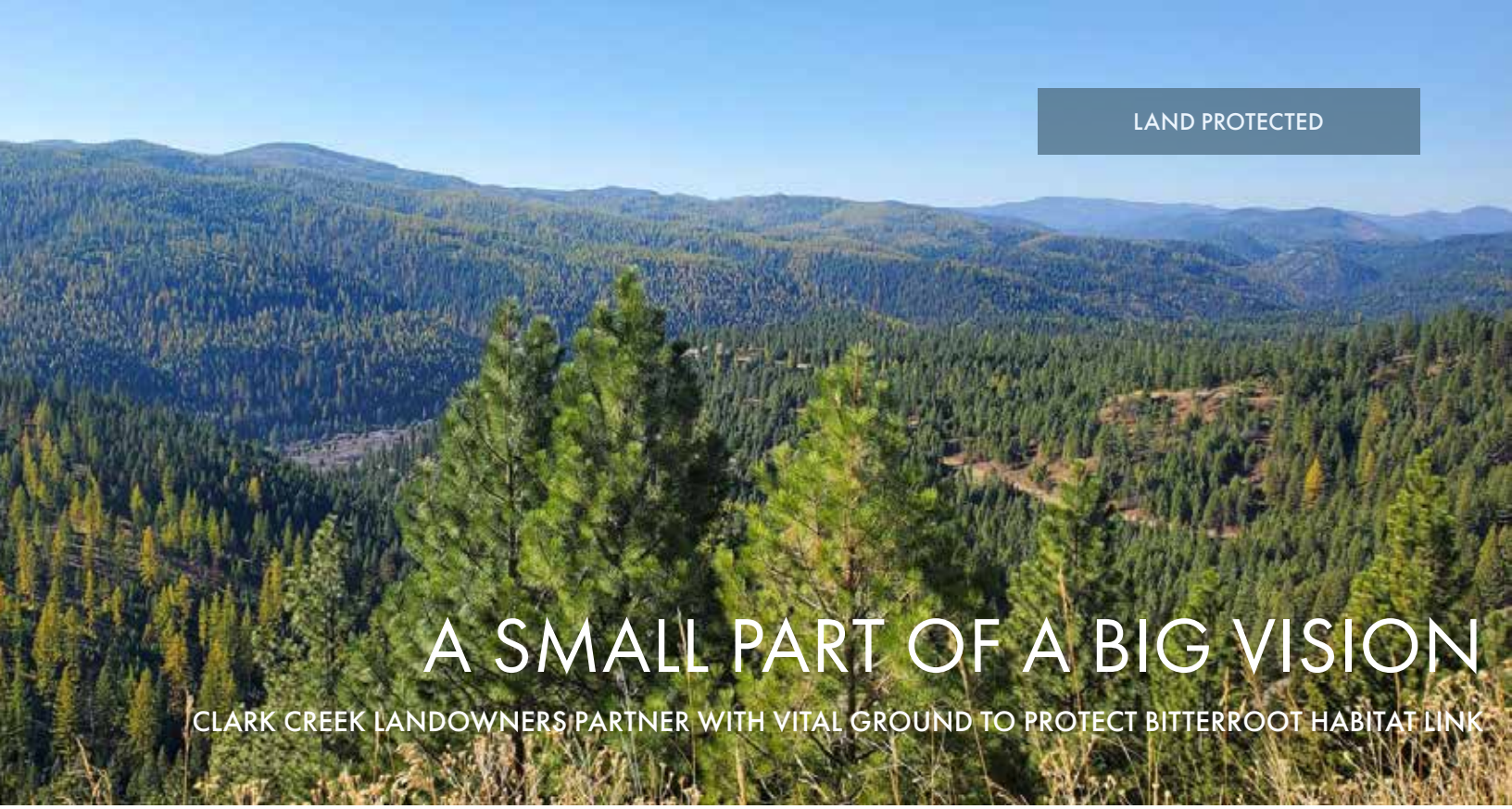
West of Missoula, the four-lane Interstate 90 cuts through the confluence area where the Ninemile Valley meets the Clark Fork River. This linkage zone connecting northwestern Montana with the Bitterroot Mountains that extend into Idaho is key habitat for a whole host of native species, with several recent grizzly sightings in the area. A new wildlife crossing structure project in the Ninemile would improve these animals' chances at safe passage.

Vital Ground is participating in the Missoula Regional Connectivity Group (MRCG) to help design new wildlife crossing infrastructure for several locations in the Ninemile area, including underpasses and exclusion fencing. This effort carries special significance as it amplifies the impact of a habitat site Vital Ground protected in partnership with the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative in 2018. The proposed underpasses would be paired with exclusion fencing that directs animals toward the safe crossing areas, as well as stream restoration work.

"This interstate slices across high-quality habitat," said Kylie Paul, a road ecologist for the Center for Large Landscape Conservation and one of MRCG's leaders. "With this wildlife crossing structure and associated fencing that we're striving to get designed, funded, and constructed, we're doing what we can to help bears and other wildlife move more easily through the landscape. We hope it will help bears skirt around the Missoula Valley and connect between the big, intact landscapes to the north and south."

The project is undergoing a feasibility assessment by the Montana Department of Transportation that will take around a year to complete. MRCG will fundraise for construction costs through public and numerous private sources and continue to host outreach events inviting community feedback, so stay tuned!

Read a longer story on this crossing structure project on our blog at ***vitalground.org/news.***



A SMALL PART OF A BIG VISION

CLARK CREEK LANDOWNERS PARTNER WITH VITAL GROUND TO PROTECT BITTERROOT HABITAT LINK

Completed in December, the 160-acre Clark Creek Project protects the southern toe of a habitat linkage zone connecting the wildlands of northwestern Montana and central Idaho.

By Matt Hart

As Montana's grizzly bears denned up for the winter, a new conservation agreement completed just before New Year's protected an important habitat corridor that could improve the grizzly's ability to reconnect its isolated populations in the Northern Rockies.

In the Clark Creek drainage west of Lolo, Mont., Vital Ground and local landowners partnered to conserve 160 acres of rich forest and wetland. Lying north of U.S. Highway 12 and south of Interstate 90, the project adds an additional piece of conserved habitat to a corridor helping connect the mountains north and west of Missoula with the sprawling Bitterroot Range that extends west into Idaho and south toward the Greater Yellowstone area.

"It's a real thrill for us to do this," said the landowners, who wish to remain anonymous. "Wildlife is very important to us and we always had the intent of wanting to put a conservation easement on this property. It's a very important wildlife corridor: we were looking at grizzly populations and the linkages and thought our property could be a small part of that."

A KEY LINK FOR GRIZZLY CONNECTIVITY

Roughly 15 miles west of Lolo, the project site borders U.S. Forest Service lands that extend north through the Petty Creek and Fish Creek areas to the Clark Fork River and I-90 near the Ninemile Creek confluence area. That places the project at the southern end of a key north-south funnel for wildlife that reach the Bitterroots from the Ninemile Range and beyond.

The link could prove especially vital for grizzlies. Over the last decade, biologists have documented multiple grizzly bears—including the famed wanderer nicknamed Ethyl—that moved through the Clark Creek drainage from the Ninemile and other nearby areas as they ranged temporarily into the Bitterroot Ecosystem, a federally-designated grizzly recovery zone that remains without an established resident population of the bears. The Ninemile Range lies at the southwestern toe of the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE) that reaches all the way to Glacier National Park. It's also close to the southern edge of the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem, meaning protecting the habitat corridor between the Ninemile and Lolo Creek could help solidify the grizzly's natural return to

the Bitterroots from multple ecosystems to the north.

"It's perfect for that north-south movement," said Jamie Jonkel, Wildlife Management Specialist for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. "We've had several grizzlies that came down and spent time feeding on hawthorn in the Lolo Creek bottoms and Clark Creek, both from the Cabinet area and the NCDE. Everything about it is really good as an intact area with good connectivity."

Meanwhile, the Bitterroot Ecosystem could also see a returning grizzly presence in its southern reaches before long, as bears continue to disperse farther west across southwestern Montana and into Idaho from the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE). As recent studies suggest, this makes the Bitterroots one of the likeliest areas for the species to naturally reconnect the NCDE and GYE populations, a reunion that biologists consider essential to the grizzly's long-term recovery in the Lower 48.

Against the backdrop of increased development pressure on the region's private lands, especially those close to Missoula and other cities, a key component of protecting regional connectivity is projects like Clark Creek that prevent subdivision and dense development in established wildlife movement areas.

"These 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."

BENEFITS BEYOND BEARS

In addition to its potential to aid regional grizzly connectivity, the Clark Creek Project conserves rich forest and wetlands that provide seasonal habitat for a wide diversity of wildlife, from elk and deer to wolves, cougars and black bears.

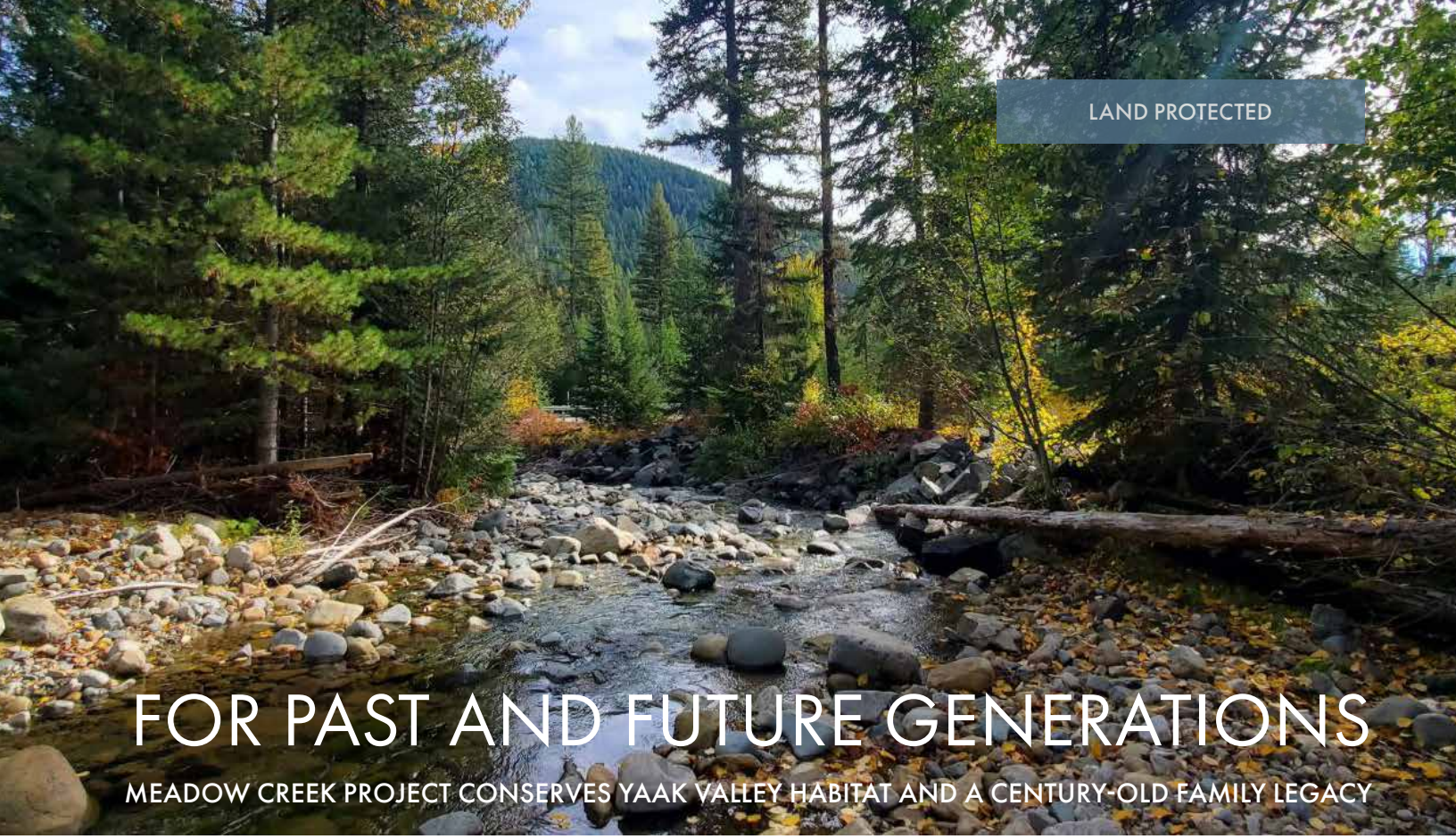
"The riparian area has consistent spring-fed flows," the landowners explained. "It's heavily used by black bears in the hot summer. They'll come in and splash around and drink, then come back to eat hawthorn and serviceberries in the fall. It also has elk wallows in it, plus mule deer, whitetail deer, and we have wolves coming through fairly often, as well as mountain lions and golden eagles."

Under the new conservation agreement, the landowners will continue to steward the land to benefit wildlife. With future subdivision and development prevented by the agreement, the project also protects the wild and scenic character of the larger Lolo Creek area, leaving the landscape open and accessible for popular activities like hiking, hunting, fishing and skiing.

"Voluntary, private land conservation efforts by landowners like these at Clark Creek will ensure bears and other wildlife have secure habitat as they move across the landscape," said Mitch Doherty, Conservation Director for Vital Ground. "These individuals recognize not just the value their land holds for wildlife, but for all of us that appreciate these open spaces."

The project contributes to Vital Ground's larger One Landscape Initiative, our conservation strategy focused on protecting the crucial private lands that connect the Northern Rockies' wild strongholds. Having already protected habitat in the Ninemile area in 2018 and completed a new project in Evaro Canyon on the eastern edge of the Ninemile Range last fall, the Clark Creek effort extends Vital Ground's impact in improving wildlife connections around Missoula's growing human footprint.

In addition to the landowners, financial support for the project came from Atira Conservation, The Jack R. Anderson Foundation, First Interstate Bank and many individual donors like you. Thank you!



FOR PAST AND FUTURE GENERATIONS

MEADOW CREEK PROJECT CONSERVES YAAK VALLEY HABITAT AND A CENTURY-OLD FAMILY LEGACY

Meadow Creek runs through the newly-protected 40-acre site before joining the Yaak River on the property, making it a vital movement area for wildlife in northwestern Montana.

By Matt Hart

An important piece of rich wildlife habitat and a family's century-old legacy of care for the land will both be protected under Vital Ground's latest conservation agreement in the Yaak Valley of northwestern Montana.

Located along the Yaak River between the communities of Troy and Yaak, the 40-acre site includes the Yaak's confluence with Meadow Creek, making it a natural movement area for a wide diversity of wildlife, including one of the Lower 48's smallest grizzly bear populations. In addition to protecting wildlife movement, the conservation easement helps maintain the Yaak's rural, scenic character and extends the Berg family's hard-earned legacy on the land.

"I am seeking to protect this acreage in part to honor my grandmother," said landowner CarolAnn Berg Jackson, whose grandparents homesteaded in the Yaak beginning in 1916. "My grandfather found work with the Forest Service but died in 1941, when I was 4. The family was able to maintain ownership because of my grandmother's strength, courage and resourcefulness. Now I hope that my grandchildren and great-grandchildren will learn to love and appreciate this very special part of the world."

CRUCIAL GROUND FOR GRIZZLIES

Surrounded by the Purcell Mountains of northwestern Montana and British Columbia, the Yaak Valley's diverse wildlife and limited development make it one of the wildest places in the Lower 48 states that does not benefit from the conservation protections of a national park or federal wilderness area. The Yaak is home to an estimated 25-30 grizzly bears, one of the smallest enduring populations south of Canada.

Conserving habitat in movement areas like Meadow Creek maintains an open, connected landscape. For the Yaak's grizzlies, that is a must, as the population's long-term survival depends on increasing its genetic diversity through breeding with bears from elsewhere. With a recent uptick in grizzly movement between the Yaak and the Cabinet Mountains to the south, conservation of habitat linkages provides resilience for wildlife against the backdrop of numerous climate impacts and region-wide

development pressures.

"It's only in the last decade or so that we've started to see movement from the Yaak to the Cabinets and vice versa, with a recent detection of gene flow in both directions" said Wayne Kasworm, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist who has led grizzly recovery efforts in the Cabinet-Yaak area since 1983. "When it comes to easements and protection of private lands, 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."

Beyond grizzlies, the Meadow Creek Project provides habitat for bull trout and Canada lynx, species listed as threatened by the Fish and Wildlife Service, as well as numerous other native fish and the region's full suite of fauna, from wolves and wolverine to moose, elk, black bears and mountain lions.

"Anything I can do to protect these magnificent creatures I am hoping to do," added Berg Jackson.

PROTECTING RURAL CHARACTER

The project site sits directly north of 38 acres also owned by the Berg family and already protected by a Vital Ground conservation easement, meaning the new agreement solidifies protection of a sizeable corridor along the Yaak Valley bottom. With Kootenai National Forest lands bordering the properties on three sides, the area will serve as a crucial linkage for wildlife moving between the higher country on either side of the river valley.

By protecting the wetlands around two waterways as well as forested uplands, the easement helps maintain the Yaak's water quality along with its enduring rural character. With other parts of northwestern Montana experiencing unprecedented spikes in their real estate markets, ensuring a conservation outcome for the Meadow Creek area will benefit wildlife and people long into the future.

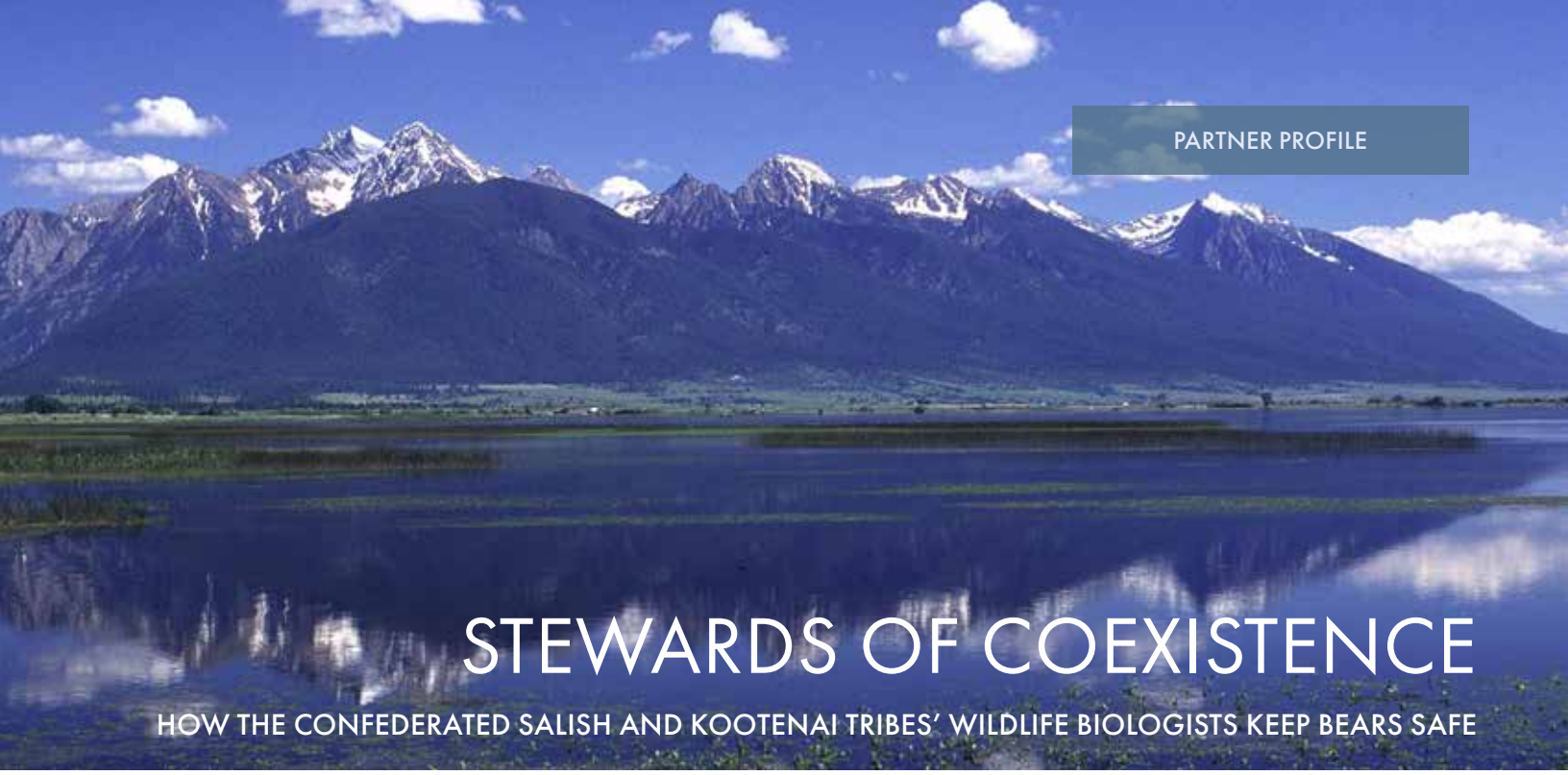
"This is an exciting addition to the already-conserved Meadow Creek property to the south," said Tanner Williams, Conservation Project Manager for Vital Ground. "Connectivity between the Yaak and the Cabinets is very important, so this is a big conservation win for wildlife as well as anyone who appreciates rugged, rural places like the Yaak."

Under the new conservation agreement, the acres will remain undeveloped outside of a small building envelope. Vital Ground and the Bergs have already collaborated on habitat restoration efforts at the neighboring property, which will now extend through the newly-protected acres. The project furthers Vital Ground's conservation footprint in the Yaak, where the organization's partnerships with landowners and occasional land purchases have conserved key habitat linkages and an open landscape since the early 2000s.

Because of its importance to grizzlies and other wide-ranging wildlife, the Meadow Creek site arose as a priority in Vital Ground's One Landscape conservation strategy, which seeks to link the Northern Rockies' wild strongholds while protecting open space and rural character from the Canadian border to the Greater Yellowstone area. Leveraging the grizzly's role as a conservation umbrella species, the One Landscape Initiative brings local landowners, wildlife experts and nonprofit partners together to achieve lasting protection of crucial shared landscapes.

In addition to a portion of the easement value donated by the Berg family, support for the Meadow Creek Project came from the Cross Charitable Foundation, Cinnabar Foundation and individual donors like you, without whom these conservation wins would not be possible!

Trail camera footage documents a grizzly bear sow and cubs crossing one of Vital Ground's conservation properties in the Yaak Valley, where a largely-isolated population of 25-30 grizzlies endures.



STEWARDS OF COEXISTENCE

HOW THE CONFEDERATED SALISH AND KOOTENAI TRIBES' WILDLIFE BIOLOGISTS KEEP BEARS SAFE

Beneath the iconic peaks of the Mission Mountains, a hard-working team of tribal wildlife managers upholds a tradition of coexistence through new practices. (Photo: Kevin Rhoades)

By Kayla Heinze

Kari Kingery, the Wildlife Program Manager of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT), looks around the office to take stock of her team. Along with seven biologists, two of whom specialize in carnivore monitoring and conflict prevention, and a variety of agency and nonprofit partners, Kari monitors, manages and mediates relationships with wildlife on the Flathead Indian Reservation in western Montana.

The Mission Valley's abundance of wetlands and creeks makes it a great home for a wide array of wild animals—as well as a growing human population and agricultural community. Vital Ground is proud to support the CSKT Wildlife Management Program in their efforts to promote coexistence between grizzly bears, other large carnivores and the people who share the landscape with them. This isn't always a simple or easy goal, as Kari detailed when we caught up over the winter via phone and email. Bears occasionally raid chicken coops, apple trees, cornfields and more and people aren't always eager to change their lifestyles in response.

"When wildlife come into competition with humans over the same resource, we have a conflict," Kari said. "Making room for carnivores on the landscape requires people changing their behaviors and thinking about how they live differently... and that's hard!"

"KILL THE CONFLICT, NOT THE CARNIVORE"

Securing attractants can certainly be hard, but to Kari it's a worthwhile investment to protect the rich and unique ecological heritage of the Northern Rockies. And it doesn't require that we forgo our lifestyles completely.

"We CAN move to the heart of the Mission Valley and raise our chickens, goats or llamas, but we have to do it differently here," Kari said. "As good stewards to our livestock and poultry, we need to take extra measures to protect them from carnivores. Which, in turn, protects our carnivores and wildlife, the wild that makes Montana attractive in the first place."

Around 2010, as more people started following that attraction and moving to the Mission Valley, the Wildlife Management Program started seeing an increase in conflicts. Hobby farming was growing in popularity, with building increasing in the valley as the grizzly population of western Montana also gradually grew. CSKT's approach had to evolve in tandem.

"As Native people, we act as stewards of the natural resources that our culture and traditions rely on," Kari

said. "We live in a very different world today than we did generations ago, and that means that managing the grizzly bear is less about the bears themselves and is really about managing the human world."

Kari Kingery, CSKT Wildlife Program Manager

To do that, tribal biologists spend a lot of time helping valley residents secure common attractants such as pet food, bird feeders, orchards and chicken coops. They strive to proactively prevent bad behavior, by bears and people, so that the difficult decision to relocate or euthanize a habituated bear can be avoided.

"We work with landowners to 'kill the conflict, not the carnivore'," Kari said. "It can be very emotionally taxing for the bear managers doing the on-the-ground work. Our biologists work tirelessly to get ahead of and prevent bears from getting into conflict, but we can't prepare a landscape conducive to coexistence between bears and humans by ourselves, we can only provide the tools and knowledge. The possibility of coexistence lies in the residents and communities that live on the landscape."

The tools provided by the Wildlife Management Program can be remarkably effective. A study conducted in the valley in 2020 found that chicken coops protected by an electric fence had a nearly zero percent chance of being raided by bears or other carnivores. Unprotected, that risk rose by 50 percent. The Tribes also run a bear-resistant garbage can loaner program and a bear spray distribution program that allows anyone with a tribal ID or tribal conservation or fishing license to purchase a can of bear spray for only $20.

A COMMUNITY COMES TOGETHER

While bear awareness takes effort, it can also be fun. CSKT's Fall Wildlife Festival embodies this by helping residents remove fruit attractants and turn it into cider while celebrating the animals that make the valley so special.

Starting in 2021, with support from a Vital Ground grant, the festival rings in the beginning of fruit gleaning season, the delicious products made with apples that have been collected and the importance of that effort in reducing conflicts with bears. After another grant from Vital Ground allowed the festival to purchase cider presses, Kari reported that 800 pounds of fruit were pressed into nearly 60 gallons of apple cider at the event.

Across the rest of the reservation, CSKT manages a social media page where community members can match their excess fruit with folks willing to harvest and use it. There are also drop-off locations where fruit is collected and distributed to local food banks, farmers and breweries. During the first year of the program, around 2,400 pounds of fruit were collected and successfully kept from becoming waste or attracting conflicts.

Kari views community-wide exchanges like these as an essential component to making the Flathead Reservation a bear-safe place. If bears get a food reward and learn bad behavior on one property, they can become a problem for surrounding neighbors, even if those folks are securing their attractants. People are also more likely to adopt bear-safe practices if they see them working effectively in their neighborhood.

"What really starts to gain traction is if people see their neighbors using electric fences, or people see their neighbors getting a bear resistant garbage can," Kari said. "That is really more of a motivator for folks."

Grizzlies have long frequented the high country of the Mission Mountains, where a tribally-designated wilderness area is closed to all human travel during a portion of the summer that involves intense grizzly feeding on army cutworm moths. But Kari noted that as the grizzly population expands back into the valley, bears have some new behaviors, like increased nocturnal activity.

"They've learned that avoidance mechanism," Kari said. "We do have bears that travel really close to homes and people don't even know that they're there because they're really good at staying out of trouble and doing natural things that bears should be doing."

For Kari, the bears themselves and her team's hard work provides hope that coexistence is and will continue to be a reality in the Mission Valley.

Creative Conservation Solutions: Giving from Your IRA

By Kim Davitt, Development Director

If you are passionate about wildlife conservation and believe in Vital Ground's work to conserve and connect habitat for grizzly bears and other wildlife, our current economic moment may have you wondering how to be more creative and strategic in your support. Consider making a charitable donation from your Individual Retirement Account (IRA) as part of creating a lasting conservation legacy.

Donating to Vital Ground or another nonprofit from your IRA enables charitably-minded individuals who are over 70 ½ to make a lasting positive impact on a cause they support while enjoying many benefits. This under-publicized tax advantage is called a Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD).

Depending on your financial situation, you might be able to take advantage of this tax benefit and donate to your favorite charity without a tax penalty.

Here are some more details and benefits:

- You can donate up to $100,000 annually without incurring income tax with a QCD.
- Minimize the effect on your cash flow; the donation is from pre-tax assets, not your savings.
- A QCD satisfies your Required Minimum Distribution (RMD).
- Your gift is excluded from taxable income, even if you don't itemize deductions.
- Your donation may save you from being pushed into a higher tax bracket.
- Gifts can be directly transferred from your IRA to Vital Ground to support our conservation work.

Learn more about this and other creative ways to give at ***vitalground.org/how-you-can-help.***

A qualified IRA donation is an inspiring way to create a legacy that protects habitat between Glacier National Park (pictured), Yellowstone and beyond. (Photo: Lance Schelvan)

Vital Ground Renews National Land Trust Accreditation

As a land trust working to directly protect the wildlife habitat and open space valued by a wide majority of Americans, Vital Ground diligently pursues professional excellence in land conservation.

One of the ways we uphold this commitment is through periodic renewal of our accreditation from the Land Trust Accreditation Commission, an independent program of the Land Trust Alliance (LTA). Earlier this year, the commission completed its rigorous assessment of Vital Ground's programs and confirmed our re-accreditation. As part of a network of over 400 accredited land trusts across the nation, the process affirms Vital Ground's dedication to accountable landscape conservation and maintaining the public's trust in our work.

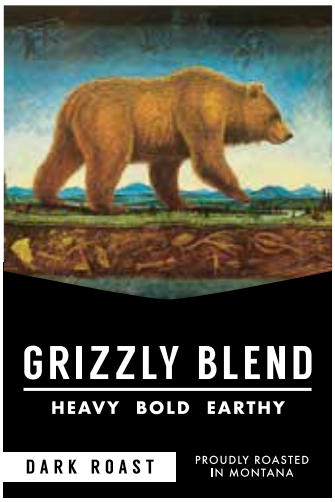
"Renewing our accreditation demonstrates that Vital Ground is deeply committed to durable landscape conservation in one the most important and inspiring wildlife communities in North America," said Ryan Lutey, Vital Ground's Executive Director. "Our renewal is a testament to our trustees, advisors and staff who all play a pivotal role in establishing the organizational accountability that underpins this critical certification."

The accreditation ensures that Vital Ground remains a strong, well-managed land trust that upholds the LTA's high standards for sound finances, ethical conduct, responsible governance and lasting stewardship. Across the country, accredited land trusts serve communities as effective champions and caretakers of their natural resources, from clean water and wildlife habitat to recreation access and local agriculture. By achieving durable conservation outcomes, land trusts safeguard the land through the generations.

"Accreditation is a great way to show that the nation's land trusts collectively ensure that every organization is strong and that our conservation work will endure the test of time," said Lutey.

For Vital Ground, that work takes the shape of permanently protecting crucial grizzly bear habitat on private lands that connect the Northern Rockies' wild strongholds. Together with our partners, the organization has protected and enhanced more than 1 million acres for wildlife since our founding in 1990, including more than 60 sites directly conserved by Vital Ground.

Thanks to supporters like you, our conservation work for 2025 is already off to a great start. Thank you for being a vital part of our next chapter as a land trust!



MONTANA COFFEE TRADERS

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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

Kodiak and Zac Efron Sow the Oaty Seeds of Conservation

Just like the wild bears whose diverse diets bring a cascade of benefits to an ecosystem, our business partners at Kodiak are crafting new foods to fuel both our bodies and the protection of our wild places. Their latest campaign, in collaboration with Zac Efron, Kodiak's Chief Brand Officer, featured a limited-edition apple brown sugar pecan oatmeal and donated $50,000 of its proceeds to directly support Vital Ground's habitat protection projects.

Efron helped Kodiak design the new oatmeal flavor, rich in gut-nourishing prebiotic fiber, and even donned overalls to showcase the straight-from-the-farm ingredients that make it so tasty. This is his latest costume change to help promote Kodiak campaigns that fund our straight-to-the-land conservation work.

This oaty addition to the Kodiak diet builds on the longstanding partnership between Kodiak and Vital Ground. Since 2017, Kodiak has routinely used their range of famous breakfast foods, as well as a variety of outdoor gear, merchandise and art, to spread excitement about open spaces and generate support for the work Vital Ground does to conserve them.

"Kodiak partners with Vital Ground to support healthy ecosystems, fostering a meaningful connection between Vital Ground's nationwide conservation community and Kodiak's," said Micah Lee, Kodiak's Senior Digital Marketing Manager. "At Kodiak, we believe that time spent outdoors enhances appreciation for nature's beauty and inspires a commitment to its preservation."

Oatmeal, overalls and Zac Efron supporting grizzly bear conservation in his latest team-up with our partners at Kodiak. What's not to love? (Photo courtesy of Kodiak)

The funds raised by Kodiak's oatmeal will enable future Vital Ground efforts to protect crucial grizzly bear corridors in places like our recently completed Meadow Creek and Clark Creek projects.

"Everything comes back to how essential the outdoors is for both our well-being as people and for the wildlife we love," said Monica Hull, Vital Ground's Development Associate who leads the business partner program. "Having such steadfast partners in Kodiak, who share our love for these landscapes, makes for really effective outreach and impactful fundraising. We are so grateful that through supplying delicious and healthy food Kodiak can give back to nature in a significant and tangible way by helping Vital Ground protect habitat."

Help Us Celebrate Vital Ground's 35th Anniversary!

From our co-founders Doug and Lynne Seus' original dream of helping wild grizzlies recover and thrive to our recent milestone of helping protect and enhance more than 1 million acres of habitat, Vital Ground has come a long way in 35 years. Thanks to a committed community of conservationists like you, since our founding in 1990 we have made significant progress in protecting the private lands that connect wild strongholds in grizzly country and partnering with local community groups to prevent conflicts and build social tolerance for grizzlies.

Beginning with Doug and Lynne's deep bond with our original grizzly ambassador, the famed actor Bart the Bear, Vital Ground's work has always been based on connections: the ones built with partners on the landscape, the ones built with and between supporters like you, and the ones we've all built with the wildlife we cherish.

These connections and your continued support allow us to keep protecting habitat and promoting coexistence at a pace that matches the ongoing threats wildlife face. With development pressures rising across the West and conflicts still prevalent on our shared landscapes, the grizzly and many of the other species that make this place so special are at risk of losing crucial habitat and being cut off from movement corridors. We are committed to caring for and stewarding the most vital places for grizzlies and other wildlife for the next 35 years and beyond. We hope you'll join us on that ride!

Vital Ground co-founders Doug and Lynne Seus and Bart the Bear. (Photo: Jed Seus)

In recognition of 35 years of conservation, we invite you to make a monthly or one-time donation to support our ongoing efforts today. To celebrate our shared love of wildlife and wild places we are offering the following thank you gifts during this special anniversary year:

- For monthly donations of $35 or more, you will be put at the top of the list to receive a limited-edition copy of Montana artist Claire Emery's 2026 calendar.
- For monthly donations of $350 or more, you will receive a high-quality print of one of the Vital Ground conservation sites you've helped protect.
- For one-time donations of $3,500 or more, you will receive a bottle of our exclusive Big Bear Blend wine.
- For one-time donations of $35,000 or more, you will be invited to our next Walk on Vital Ground to see a project site with staff and other supporters.

Stay tuned to Vital Ground's email newsletter, website and social media channels for more exciting updates on special 35th anniversary events later this year, including:

- July hike-a-thon: solo or with a team, hike/run 35 miles over the month and collect pledges for Vital Ground!
- Online auction to support habitat conservation featuring art, travel, handmade goods and more.

Get all the updates on 35th Anniversary events at ***vitalground.org/35th-anniversary***

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GROWING UP A GRIZZLY

THE REALITIES OF LIFE AS A BEAR CUB ON LANDSCAPES IMPACTED BY HUMANS

During an average year in the Northern Rockies, only around half of the grizzly bear cubs born over the winter will make it to the next one. (Photo: Jamie Scarrow)

By Kayla Heinze

Grizzly bears are born blind, weighing about as much as a block of butter. The cubs that become one of the largest and most powerful animals in North America start their lives vulnerable and dependent in the darkness of their natal dens. In the depths of winter, this is how the remarkable life of a wild grizzly begins. Over the next 20 to 25 years—their estimated average lifespan in the wild—they will achieve many feats of survival, from astonishing foraging behaviors to the physiological wonder of hibernation and, for many individuals, navigating the challenges of sharing the landscape with a growing human population.

Before all that, these young cubs will absorb many lessons from their mother about how to be a bear. This generational transfer of survival strategies is an important part of the species' overall resilience. Sow grizzlies can pass on the time-tested insights of their experiences—favorite glacier lily meadows and how to dig up their succulent bulbs, the local bear rub tree and how to interpret its many aromatic messages—and give their cubs a better chance at a long adult life.

As they grow rapidly in size and capability, the cubs will eventually leave their mothers and create their own home territories, which can be as large as 600 square miles. But for now, they nurse in the den with closed eyes. What they find when they open them and emerge into the spring air is still to be determined. The landscapes they grow up on are shaped, in so many ways, by us.

A BEAR CUB'S FIRST YEAR

Bears have a unique reproductive strategy called delayed implantation. In the fall, months after mating, a female's embryo will either be reabsorbed or, if she is healthy enough, finally implant and begin developing into a baby bear. Since sow grizzlies do not eat or drink through the entirety of their time in the den, they must have adequate calories stored in their body fat to get them and their nursing cubs through months of hibernation.

And it does require an extraordinary amount of energy. When they leave their dens, typically in April or May, a sow's 1 to 4 cubs will have grown some 12 to 20 times larger solely from the nutrition of her milk. They'll often

get their first tastes of wild foods from early spring shoots, roots and grubs in wetland habitats like Vital Ground's recently protected Meadow Creek area and restoration sites at Salmon Prairie and the Broadie Habitat Preserve.

Their mother will also help the cubs navigate threats like aggressive male bears, road crossings and other infrastructure. But life for young bears is hard and sadly, many will not make it until their next winter. In Yellowstone National Park, annual cub survival is around 55 percent, meaning nearly half will die due to a variety of causes.

This survival rate compounds with the species' late age of sexual maturity, small average litter size and long intervals between births to make grizzly bears one of the slowest-reproducing land mammals. On average, a female grizzly will birth about 10 cubs in her entire lifetime, with only half surviving their first year.

Those that do will enter the den after putting their new foraging skills to the test during fall hyperphagia. Much larger than when they emerged, the cubs will again spend the winter denning with their mother before starting the independent portion of their life journey either the following summer or sometimes as late as their fourth year.

PROTECTING HABITAT FOR CUBS LEAVING MOM

Dispersing and establishing a home territory happens gradually for a grizzly. For a few years, sub-adult bears make exploratory movements across the landscape, occasionally returning to their mother's home range until they eventually stick in a new spot. Male bears tend to disperse farther than females, who will sometimes stay close to or overlap with their mother's territory even as an adult. As the carriers and guardians of future generations of grizzlies, this lack of female dispersal adds to the conservation challenges facing the species.

"Female dispersal from a source population is necessary for natural augmentation or recolonization of suitable habitat. However, female dispersal appears to be rare," said the authors of one Canadian study.

Since dispersal far from their home range is uncommon for females but important for connecting isolated populations of bears and providing genetic resilience, conservationists must make sure dispersing bears have the best shot possible at successfully moving across the landscape. Vital Ground strategically protects habitat in wildlife movement corridors so bears have open spaces to do just this.

How young bears navigate human infrastructure, attractants and interactions depends on their mother's teachings. One study found that offspring of mothers involved in conflicts were more likely to get into conflicts themselves—with 62 percent of them doing so—while there was no correlation between a father's conflict rates and that of his offspring. This suggests that it's not genetic inheritance but rather the social transfer of behavior and knowledge from mother to cub that can make a young bear either conflict-avoidant or conflict-prone.

There are also horizontal transfers of knowledge. Non-sibling bears will sometimes play-fight with one another, collectively learning social skills. And we humans have an influence, too. By securing our attractants, we help mother bears avoid conflicts and support them passing conflict-avoidance behaviors on to their cubs.

PASSING THE CONSERVATION TORCH

Like bears, we bestow our knowledge and behaviors to future generations. Instilling conservation values and actively protecting the places and animals that will make our children's world richer is exactly the kind of behavior we should be imparting. It helps create a future of abundant wildlife and coexistence between species.

We know that intact ecosystems with diverse, healthy wildlife are valuable both for their own sake and our benefit as people dependent on these landscapes. Protecting habitat doesn't just make a tangible difference on the ground; it also enacts your conservation ethics and influences those around you to carry them forward.

Like a wise mother grizzly, you can use your experiences to help others become conservationists. Together we can shape the landscapes that young bears will emerge onto, this spring and beyond, in positive, life-supporting ways. If we do so, when future generations open their eyes and take in this world for the first time they will see, like we have been so fortunate to, how beautiful it is.

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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, to the benefit of 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 learn more and support our work.

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