THE VITAL GROUND FOUNDATION | FALL 2025

VITALNEWS

35 YEARS OF CONSERVATION: 1990-2025

PROTECTING THE PATHWAYS THAT CONNECT LANDSCAPES

Much has changed across the landscape of grizzly bear recovery since Vital Ground's founding in 1990. When Doug and Lynne Seus took that first plunge into conservation work 35 years ago by buying 240 acres of prime grizzly habitat along Montana's Rocky Mountain Front, it was still a novel idea to protect land outside of the national parks with grizzlies in mind. Now, your support has helped Vital Ground and its partners protect and enhance more than 1 million acres of it.

Some things haven't changed, however: grizzly recovery remains a slow process thanks to the bear's own biology (p. 4) and the Northern Rockies' ongoing habitat fragmentation. As new roads and subdivisions continue to crop up in grizzly country, and as mounting climate impacts continue to alter the patterns of countless species, the Great Bear needs your support of Vital Ground as much as it did 35 years ago. From protecting key acres near highway crossings (p. 3) to preventing conflicts across the region (p. 6), your impact remains tangible and lasting, pushing Vital Ground steadily forward as a leader in wildlife conservation.

Inside this issue:

Protecting the Interstate 90 corridor 3

New projects: Introducing the Idaho Panhandle Initiative 4

Conservation partners prevent conflicts from Wyoming to Washington 6

New partner: Yellowstone Bourbon 9

Vital Ground earns statewide award 11

A Woman Among Wolves: Book reading with biologist Diane Boyd 13

The Grizzly Umbrella: The overlap of grizzly and native fish conservation 14

Cover photo by Carl Donohue

VITAL GROUND
FOUNDATION

A 35-Year Journey: From a Question to a Conservation Leader

Take a minute to imagine grizzly bear conservation if Vital Ground didn't exist. That's what the producer Arne Schmidt unintentionally prompted Doug and Lynne Seus to do while they were collaborating with Bart the Bear on *The Great Outdoors* in the late 1980s. Arne asked Doug and Lynne which organization he could support to specifically benefit wild grizzlies—and at that time, there was no ready or apparent answer.

Without Vital Ground, there would be numerous groups litigating and debating the legal status and management policies for North America's grizzly bears, which is important work. But if Doug and Lynne hadn't taken Arne's question to heart, there might still be no organization singularly focused on protecting the actual, physical habitat the Great Bear needs in the Northern Rockies, the landscape linkages essential for a durable grizzly bear population in the Lower 48.

Luckily for wildlife and all of us who see grizzlies as a vital part of our landscape, Doug and Lynne ran with the idea and began reaching out to everyone they could think of to help take up the charge. Two years after *The Great Outdoors* was released, Vital Ground received its federal determination letter and embarked on its journey to protect and restore North America's grizzly bear populations for future generations by conserving wildlife habitat and preventing conflicts between bears and people.

That mission has led to the protection and enhancement of more than 1 million acres of some of the most important habitat left in North America. Vital Ground currently holds title to 64 conservation properties totaling more than 14,000 acres on private lands, and it has granted more than $1 million to tangibly make life better for grizzlies and myriad other species on both public and private lands from Wyoming to Washington and beyond (see Conservation Partners, p. 6).

When the Seuses founded Vital Ground 35 years ago, they could have gone out and engaged a lawyer to draft organizational documents and an accountant to keep track of finances, and just hoped that people would join. But as my kids would say, Doug and Lynne "understood the assignment." They intuitively knew the way to build something meaningful and durable was to engage energetic people who would help to shape a vision by showing up themselves.

Doug and Lynne Seus share a laugh with Board Chair Kelly Johnson (center) in September.

As many of you know, you can't spend any time around the Seuses without succumbing to their contagious energy, and from the organization's earliest days, that enthusiasm transferred to countless trustees, advisors, volunteers, donors and staff. Doug and Lynne's collaborative drive charted Vital Ground's approach to the work of conservation and the organization's course over the last 35 years. To celebrate that spirit of reaching far and wide, at a fundraiser in September we presented Doug and Lynne with the organization's highest honor: Vital Ground's Landscape Legacy Award.

Whether your own story with Vital Ground began back in those early days with Doug and Lynne or you've just discovered us, you have an important role to play in carrying the legacy of our organization and its unique mission forward, into the next 35 years (and beyond!) of accomplishing good, tangible work for wild grizzlies and all things wild.

With gratitude for your support,

Ryan Lutey, Executive Director

CRUCIAL CORRIDORS

ALONG INTERSTATE 90 IN WESTERN MONTANA, TWO KEY PROJECTS ARE SET TO CLOSE BY YEAR'S END

The Brock Creek Project protects a habitat link along I-90 east of Missoula, including a bridge span allowing wildlife to pass under the highway. (Photo: Daniel Anderson/Y2Y)

Grizzly bears and highways don't work well together. As intelligent mammals who begin learning survival skills from the moment they emerge from their natal dens, most bears figure out quickly to avoid the roar and speeding traffic of an interstate.

Just ask Lingenpolter, a collared grizzly named by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks biologists. As his collar revealed in 2021, the young bear approached Interstate 90 from the north more than 50 times, turning back each time before he finally deemed it safe enough to cross.

Lingenpolter's journey took him through much of a key linkage area between Missoula and Butte. Now, a new habitat project within this corridor and another west of Missoula are set to close by the end of 2025, conserving crucial acres—and infrastructure—that connect ecosystems.

Between the towns of Drummond and Garrison, right in the middle of the linkage zone across which Lingenpolter zigzagged, the **Brock Creek Project** will protect important habitat connecting the foothills and valley bottom on the north side of the interstate. Crucially, the project abuts a highway bridge span under which wildlife regularly passes. In doing so, animals move between the southern fringe of the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE)—the wildland complex home to Glacier National Park, the Bob Marshall Wilderness, and more than 1,000 grizzly bears—and the High Divide area, a patchwork of wild and working lands that extends south toward the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and represents one of the key potential pathways in regional connectivity models for grizzlies and other wide-ranging species like wolves and wolverine (see regional map on p. 7).

Farther north and west, the **Nellie Creek Project** will conserve another crucial movement area along I-90. Located outside the town of Superior about 50 miles west of Missoula, this conservation easement will protect a riparian corridor that links the valley bottom with the foothills of the Bitterroot Mountains. While the Bitterroots extend to the south, an underpass near the project connects it with forestlands north of the Clark Fork that extend into both the NCDE and Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem.

As key habitat connections on regional and transboundary scales, both projects are joint efforts between Vital Ground and the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y). The Cinnabar Foundation has provided additional partnership on the Nellie Creek easement, and individual contributions from supporters like you have pushed these efforts to the verge of closing as we enter the holiday season. Stay tuned to our email newsletter and ***vitalground.org/news*** for the full success stories upon project completion!

NEW INITIATIVE

PANHANDLE PATHWAYS

THE IDAHO PANHANDLE INITIATIVE WILL PROTECT FIVE KEY HABITAT SITES THAT CONNECT ECOSYSTEMS

The Kootenai Valley in North Idaho splits the Selkirk and Cabinet-Yaak ecosystems, with several new projects aiming to protect habitat links between them. (Photo: Randy Beacham)

By Matt Hart

Grizzly bears can move fast, running at more than 30 miles per hour to chase down fleeing prey. The species' reproductive cycle, however, is one of the slowest in the mammal world. Female grizzlies take five years to reach sexual maturity, two or sometimes three years to raise a litter of 1-4 cubs, then often a year or two after before their bodies are ready to mate again. That makes recovering a grizzly population in a place like the Selkirk Mountains of northern Idaho a painstakingly slow ordeal.

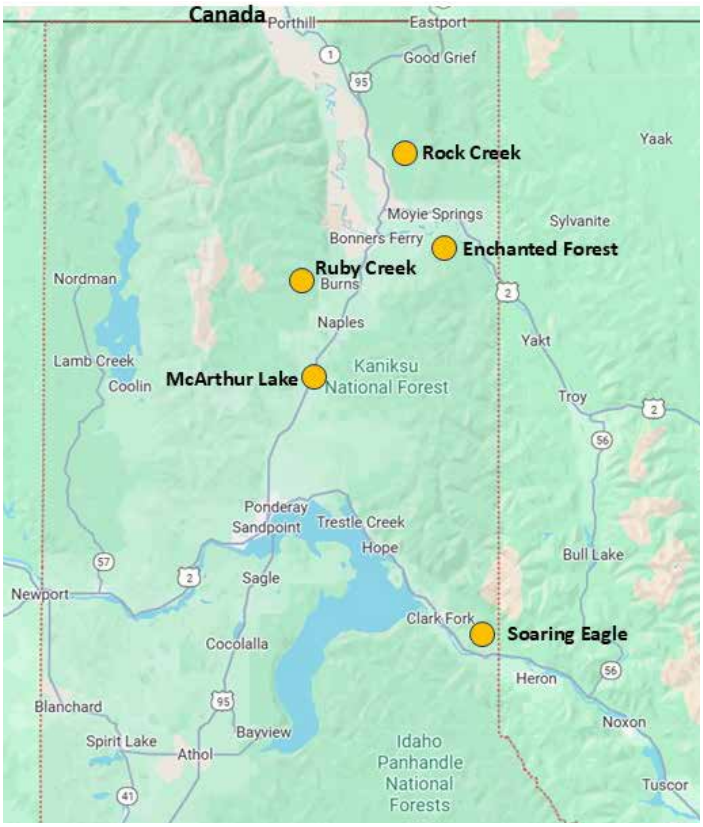
Indeed, protecting habitat for those recovering bears can sometimes take as long as natural population growth. Since Vital Ground moved from Utah to Montana more than 20 years ago, we have kept a watchful eye on many crucial habitat connections between the Selkirk Ecosystem and its neighbor to the east, the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem. With both populations still containing fewer than 100 grizzlies—meaning only a handful of reproducing females in a given year—improved connectivity and genetic diversity is essential to their long-term survival.

Your support has already helped protect more than 5,500 acres across nearly 20 projects in northern Idaho. Now, several crucial opportunities to partner with landowners and protect key pieces of land have coincided after years of waiting. The Idaho Panhandle Initiative aims to conserve five new habitat connections between the Selkirk and Cabinet-Yaak ecosystems, totaling more than 2,500 acres of protection.

PROTECTING THE PINCH POINTS

Look at a topographic map of the Idaho Panhandle and your eye may well gravitate to McArthur Lake. About halfway between the area's two largest towns, Sandpoint and Bonners Ferry, the small lake sits in the narrowest gap between the Selkirk and Cabinet mountain ranges. Running through the gap like a dividing wall is U.S. Highway 95.

Fortunately, collaborative momentum is on the rise to improve highway safety for people and wildlife alike, and the McArthur Lake area has benefitted, with recent improvements to fencing and underpasses increasing the chances of bears and other animals safely moving between the mountain ranges. Habitat protection is a crucial part of the equation as well, and Vital Ground and the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y) are working to conserve a key parcel located just north of the lake and east of the highway, protecting wildlife



movement onto adjacent national and state forestlands in the Cabinets.

North of McArthur Lake, a wider valley opens between the Selkirks and Cabinets as the land drops down toward Bonners Ferry and the Kootenai River. Limiting dense development in this corridor will keep it open for wildlife movement, with two more projects aiming to do so. One will protect habitat on the edge of the Selkirks along Ruby Creek while the other, the initiative's largest, will conserve over 1,000 acres by consolidating six parcels known as Enchanted Forest that lie on the edge of the Cabinets adjacent to Vital Ground's Clifty View Foothills Project completed in 2007.

"The lower elevations are bottlenecks for key species like grizzly bear," says Greg Johnson, a retired Idaho Fish & Game biologist and owner of one of the conserved Clifty View properties. "There's that constant pressure to divide and develop land, so where Vital Ground has their most important role here is to put together conservation easement projects in those key critical areas."

NORTH-SOUTH EXTENSIONS

In addition to crossing the central Selkirk-Cabinet corridor, wildlife can move from the ends of the Idaho Panhandle into farther-reaching mountain ranges that feature in regional connectivity goals. North of Bonners Ferry, where the Kootenai River turns to flow north toward British Columbia, the Purcell Mountains rise east of the river, extending into the Yaak Valley in Montana and north into Canadian wildlands. Along Rock Creek, a tributary of the Kootenai that flows down out of the Purcells, Vital Ground seeks to aid that movement by conserving a rich stretch of forest and wetland habitat.

Meanwhile, in the southern portion of the Panhandle, the Clark Fork River flows out of Montana and splits the Cabinet and Coeur d'Alene ranges, with the latter reaching south along the Idaho-Montana border into the sprawling Bitterroot Ecosystem. The initiative's final project, Soaring Eagle, sits on the north side of the Clark Fork within this linkage zone and aims to conserve rich habitat along a lake and several tributary streams.

All told, these five habitat protection efforts stand to solidify movement areas up and down the Panhandle, enabling safer passage between the Selkirk and Cabinet-Yaak ecosystems and their enduring grizzly populations, while also maintaining important connections to larger wildland networks to both the north and south.

"The Idaho Panhandle Initiative is our most ambitious effort yet to make sure North Idaho continues to support both wildlife movement and the rural, scenic character that its residents cherish," says Conservation Director Mitch Doherty. "These projects each carry unique habitat values that support not just regional grizzly bear recovery but entire communities of animal and plant life. We've been watching some of these locations for decades and are excited that supporters and partners are enabling us to act quickly on these great conservation opportunities."

Decades in the making but now in need of rapid support, you can help the Idaho Panhandle Initiative protect these crucial landscape connections with your year-end or monthly contribution. Grizzly recovery may be slow work, but acting quickly to protect key habitat will enable that longer, Nature-paced process to continue in a hopeful direction.

MAKING MOVEMENT SAFER

HOW YOUR SUPPORT HELPS VITAL GROUND PARTNERS KEEP BEARS AND PEOPLE OUT OF TROUBLE

Photo courtesy of Swan Valley Connections

By Matt Hart

You know how the saying goes: X just isn't complete without Y. Thanksgiving and pumpkin pie. A wedding reception and an embarrassing toast. The holiday season and a delayed flight.

The two prongs of Vital Ground's mission work that way, too. Habitat protection isn't complete without conflict prevention. For all of our work conserving key private lands that connect wild strongholds, regional recovery and connectivity for grizzly bears will only be possible if grizzlies and people improve their ability to coexist and limit conflicts where their movement and activities overlap.

A recent grassroots study by the California Wolf Project and UC Berkeley concluded that for the Lower 48's three most iconic and persecuted large predators—wolves, grizzlies and mountain lions—a necessity for continued recovery is "that environmental organizations and agencies form alliances with the affected communities—especially private landowners, who steward about 60 percent of the land in the United States." The next chapter of predator conservation, the authors write, "will rely on private citizens and organizations to manage their land in ways that minimize conflict."

Thanks to your support, Vital Ground has been implementing that study's assessment through our One Landscape Initiative for nearly a decade, with our conflict prevention partner grants supporting local organizations and state and tribal wildlife agencies in equipping landowners and citizens with the tools and information needed for coexistence with grizzlies.

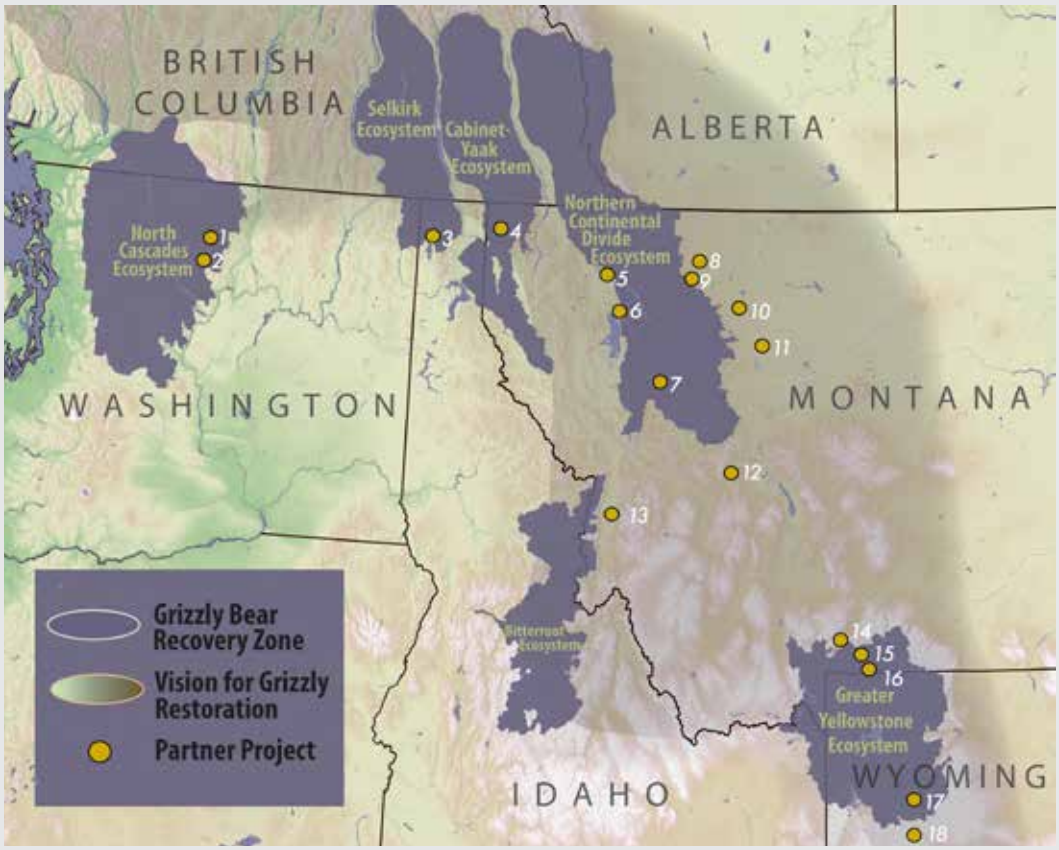
In 2025, you helped 18 partner programs make the landscape safer for bears and people alike across all of the grizzly's six recovery areas in the Lower 48. From Wyoming to Washington, your support enabled tangible conflict prevention through proven strategies.

PREPARING THE FRONTIERS OF GRIZZLY RANGE

After receiving an initial green light last spring, federal grizzly reintroduction to Washington's North Cascades Ecosystem is stuck in political limbo, but Vital Ground is not waiting to help the communities that would be most impacted by the grizzly's return. On the eastern side of the ecosystem, where potential grizzly range and working lands overlap, you helped support the **Methow Valley**

Citizens Council's bear-aware education efforts and bear spray rental program, while the grizzly education events hosted by **Conservation Northwest** help the public learn about conflict prevention strategies and build trust in the potential for coexistence.

Farther east, Washington's northeastern corner and the northern Idaho Panhandle form the American portion of the Selkirk Ecosystem, home to less than 100 grizzlies, just like its neighboring ecosystem to the east, the Cabinet-Yaak. Connectivity between the two is limited but slowly improving, and two conflict prevention programs will help. With your support, Idaho's **Priest Lake State Park**—located just a few miles from Vital Ground's Bismark Meadows Project—installed new bear-resistant dumpsters and educational signage this year, while the **Yaak Valley Forest Council** launched a new bear-aware educational campaign for schools and communities in Montana's northwestern corner.



2025 CONSERVATION PARTNERS: 1. Methow Valley Citizens Council: Education and bear spray rentals 2. Conservation Northwest: North Cascades grizzly education events 3. Priest Lake State Park: Bear-resistant dumpsters and educational signage 4. Yaak Valley Forest Council: Bear Aware educational campaign 5. People and Carnivores: Bear-resistant dumpsters for Columbia Falls businesses 6. Swan Valley Connections: Electric fencing for Bigfork businesses 7. Blackfoot Challenge: Electric fencing for Seeley Lake-area ranch 8. Blackfeet Nation Fish & Wildlife Dept.: GPS collars for grizzly bear tracking 9. National Wildlife Federation: Livestock conflict reduction outside Glacier National Park 10. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP): Bear-resistant doors for grain silos 11. Montana FWP: Drones for bear monitoring and hazing 12. Montana FWP: Livestock carcass removal and electric fencing for Avon-area ranches 13. Montana FWP: Cider press and Bear Aware event in Hamilton 14. Tom Miner Basin Association: Range rider and rancher outreach programs 15. Bear Aware Gardiner: 40-45 bear-resistant garbage bins 16. North Yellowstone Educational Foundation: Wildlife fence around Gardiner High School track 17. Shoshone National Forest: Improved bear-aware sanitation for Yellowstone gateway campgrounds 18. Teton Valley Ranch Camp: Bear-resistant sanitation for Dubois-area guest ranch.

COEXISTENCE AROUND THE EDGES OF GLACIER

The Lower 48's largest grizzly population anchors itself in the wildlands of Glacier National Park and the Bob Marshall Wilderness. But for this Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE) population to spearhead regional connectivity through successful dispersal of grizzlies to neighboring ecosystems, bears can't run into conflicts as soon as they cross onto private lands.

In the Flathead Valley west of Glacier, you're helping improve that crucial coexistence through **People and Carnivores'** bear-resistant dumpster program for businesses in Columbia Falls and **Swan Valley Connections'** electric fencing efforts to help businesses in Bigfork secure their garbage areas. Farther south in the NCDE, between the Bob Marshall and the Mission Mountains Wilderness, the **Blackfoot Challenge** continues to equip landowners, with this year's partner project an electric fencing effort for a ranch near Seeley Lake.

On the other side of the Glacier-Bob Marshall wilds, the Rocky Mountain Front region is home to the geographic and cultural border between mountains and prairie.

Grizzlies are following waterways out of the high country and onto their historic grassland habitat, but they're ending up in too many conflicts with livestock producers, farmers and communities in the process. One group leading the way for coexistence is the **Blackfeet Nation Fish & Wildlife Department**, with Vital Ground support helping improve their GPS collaring program that monitors bears crossing tribal lands so they can head off incidents before they happen. The landscape east of Glacier will also be safer thanks to a new **National Wildlife Federation** project to reduce livestock and grizzly conflicts on national forestlands just outside the park.

Meanwhile, south and east of the Blackfeet Reservation, **Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks** (FWP) serves as the front-line responder to grizzly conflicts on the prairie, and its wildlife managers work hard to help landowners head off problems through coexistence tools. Your support of two FWP projects in the area made important strides to limit conflicts and build social tolerance along the Front. The state agency subsidized bear-resistant doors for several grain silos and Vital Ground also helped purchase two aerial drones for wildlife managers to use in monitoring and hazing bears away from potential conflict sites on agricultural lands, a new strategy that has shown early effectiveness in being more precise than deterrents like cracker shells, airhorns or guardian dogs.

SAFER CORRIDORS TO AND FROM YELLOWSTONE

The most important linkage for regional grizzly recovery remains unfulfilled, as the roughly 1,000 grizzlies of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) remain genetically isolated from their counterparts to the north. The gap in agency-documented grizzly range between the NCDE and GYE populations is slowly shrinking, however, now hovering around 50 miles. Robust conflict prevention will lead the way toward a long-anticipated reunion.

Bears moving south from the Glacier-Bob Marshall region must contend with a patchwork of agriculture, tourism and transportation-related threats. South of the Bob in the Little Blackfoot Valley and Avon area, ranging grizzlies will be safer thanks to your support of FWP's livestock carcass removal and electric fencing programs. Farther west, another potential pathway between the NCDE and GYE lies through the Bitterroot Ecosystem, a designated grizzly recovery zone that still lacks a resident, reproducing grizzly population. That population could one day contain genes from both Glacier- and Yellowstone-area bears, but first the few grizzlies who wander into the Bitterroots need to stay out of trouble. FWP is helping make it happen while building public trust in grizzly recovery through a cider-pressing and educational event in Hamilton that encourages removal of that tastiest of fall bear attractants, backyard apples.

Finally, you helped Vital Ground proudly support five partners in and around the GYE itself. Beyond the northern edge of the park, the **Tom Miner Basin** becomes many bears' first brush with agricultural lands, and a robust community range rider and rancher outreach program helps that boundary stay safer. Meanwhile, Yellowstone's northern gateway community of Gardiner is an inspiring leader in conflict prevention, with your support helping the **Bear Aware Gardiner** program distribute dozens of bear-resistant garbage bins and the **North Yellowstone Educational Foundation** enable a new wildlife-safe fence to be built around high school athletic facilities.

South of the park in Wyoming, GYE bears run into many risks, but improved conflict prevention can help both grizzlies and people stay safe while building social tolerance. With federal funding slim, you helped Vital Ground step in this year to keep the **Shoshone National Forest's** bear-resistant garbage efforts in campgrounds functioning, and in the Dubois area, **Teton Valley Ranch Camp**, a destination dude ranch, become a coexistence leader through new bear-resistant sanitation measures.

As gratifying as it is to see a key piece of land protected from subdivision and development, it's equally fulfilling to know that communities, businesses and landowners surrounding these crucial habitat areas are practicing the hard work of conflict prevention for bears and other wildlife. So as bears retreat to winter dens, take heart knowing your support of Vital Ground made the physical and social landscapes of grizzly country safer this year. These partnerships and the vital work they enable couldn't happen without you!

Meet our Newest Business Partner: Yellowstone Bourbon

By Monica Hull, Corporate Giving & Outreach Coordinator

As Vital Ground celebrates 35 years of conserving wildlife habitat, we are proud to announce a new business partnership with Yellowstone Bourbon, a whiskey brand with more than 150 years under its belt.

Established in 1872, Yellowstone Bourbon was crafted to honor the sprawling wonder of America's first national park. As a longtime supporter of the National Parks Conservation Association, the company has shown a strong commitment to giving back by conserving the natural marvels of the parks and the animals found within.

But those animals, from bears to wolves to bison, don't know when they cross a park boundary. So Yellowstone Bourbon is extending their reach to support habitat protection and conflict prevention beyond the parks. As a result, they will help one of the most iconic features of Yellowstone—its grizzlies—stay safe as they continue to gradually expand their range in the Northern Rockies.

"Yellowstone Bourbon is honored to continue our longstanding commitment to help conserve and protect the outdoors, and the wildlife that call it home," says Shanae Randolph, Marketing Director of Yellowstone Bourbon.

"Bears are close to our heart, as the Yellowstone brand has been associated with bears since our first major ad campaign featuring the Yellowstone National Park Bears premiered in 1948. We are thrilled to support Vital Ground in their mission, and are humbled to have the opportunity."

Yellowstone Bourbon can be found at many local carriers, so if bourbon is your style we hope you'll join us this holiday season and raise a glass as you reconnect with friends and family, knowing the whiskey in that glass is helping the grizzly reconnect its range. Cheers to a great new business partner helping advance Vital Ground's work for wildlife into the next 35 years and beyond!

Join Our Next Wild Bear Adventure!

Travel with Vital Ground to ***Knight Inlet Lodge*** *in coastal British Columbia next fall for the bear lover's trip of a lifetime. World-class bear viewing along a salmon stream and estuary awaits, as well as sea kayaking, rainforest hiking, marine wildlife viewing and exceptional dining.*

- ***When****: October 15-20, 2026*
- ***Where****: Knight Inlet Lodge, an Indigenous-owned ecotourism lodge specializing in bear viewing.*
- ***For more info****: Visit vitalground.org/knight-inlet*
- ***To reserve a spot:*** *Contact Kim Davitt, Development Dir., at (406) 549-8650 or kdavitt@vitalground.org.*

Artist Claire Emery Evokes "Vitality" in Partner Calendar

The iconic wildlife and majestic scenery of the Northern Rockies have long inspired stirring works of art. But how often has that art directly supported the protection of key habitat on the landscapes it depicts? Now is your chance to be a part of that dynamic pairing!

Vital Ground is honored and grateful to partner with Missoula-based artist Claire Emery on "Vitality," Claire's 2026 calendar that depicts natural scenes inspired by our conservation work. From snow geese along the Rocky Mountain Front to a wolverine in the winter high country, the 12 woodblock prints don't just include stirring interpretations of grizzly bears, but also capture the full ecological benefits of grizzly conservation.

"Take a moment to pause and drink in the beauty, energy and vitality of wild lives thriving beyond the borders of our cities and towns," Claire writes on the back cover, explaining that the calendar is "Dedicated to the Vital Ground Foundation, whose steadfast work protects and connects vital habitat for grizzly bears and all the animals and plants who thrive there."

Claire's artistic process begins outdoors, where she investigates the genius of nature through careful observation, sketches and writing. Then, in the studio she turns those inspirations into remarkable, complex woodblock prints.

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

"Crossing Over" depicts a grizzly crossing the Kootenai River at Vital Ground's Wild River Project. The image is an original woodblock print from artist Claire Emery's 2026 calendar "Vitality," with proceeds supporting Vital Ground's mission.

See the remarkable results of this process and support habitat conservation by ordering your copy of "Vitality" today. Snag a few to give as gifts, too, knowing you're supporting local art and habitat protection!

Get your copy of the "Vitality" calendar and find other holiday gifts at ***vitalground.org/shop.***

Vital Ground Earns Statewide Conservation Award

Grizzly bears may not be able to recognize state boundaries, but state-level conservation groups have played a major role in the species' recovery in the Lower 48. Vital Ground was proud to have our own habitat protection and conflict prevention efforts for grizzlies and all things wild—the majority of which occur in Montana—recognized recently by a longtime state-level conservation leader, the Montana Wildlife Federation (MWF). This spring, MWF selected Vital Ground as its 2025 Conservation Organization of the Year.

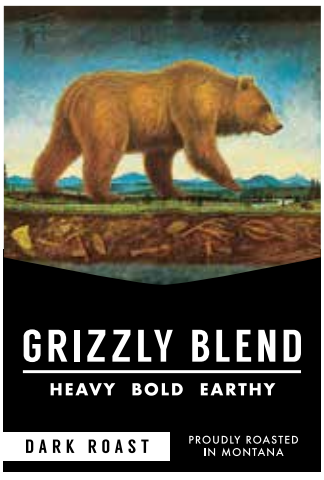
Each year, MWF tabs its Conservation Organization of the Year based on a group or nonprofit's measurable efforts to conserve Montana's natural resources and wildlife, their history of consistent commitment, and their continued promise to advance the cause of conservation in the years ahead. The award honors organizations that have most effectively promoted natural resource conservation in Montana through on-the-ground work, public education and long-term impact.

"We look at the success we've had with species like the grizzly bear, and it's clear that conservation wins are built on decades of quiet, steady work," says Frank Szollosi, Executive Director of MWF. "Vital Ground has been one of those key contributors, advancing landscape-level protection in a way that benefits not just wildlife, but also unites Montanans."

Starting with our first habitat project along the Rocky Mountain Front 35 years ago, Vital Ground has focused the bulk of our efforts in Montana, where grizzlies continue to slowly reconnect their fragmented habitat strongholds. From working lands and waterways along the Front to the rugged Yaak Valley in the state's northwestern corner to rangelands outside Yellowstone National Park, Vital Ground's conservation easements, land acquisitions and conflict prevention partnerships have helped build a safer, more open landscape for the benefit of wildlife and people alike.

Vital Ground has directly conserved more than 6,500 acres on private lands in Montana, with partner projects positively impacting hundreds of thousands more. Those numbers are set to rise significantly in the next year, with more than a dozen habitat protection projects currently moving forward.

"It's an honor to be recognized by Montana's oldest conservation organization," says Ryan Lutey, Executive Director of Vital Ground. "We greatly appreciate how effectively the Federation brings together Montana's wildlife enthusiasts to unite their voices on myriad conservation issues that may fall outside the scope of Vital Ground's mission but that benefit grizzlies and other wildlife nonetheless. We're also deeply grateful to Vital Ground's community of supporters that extends far beyond Montana and without whom none of the organization's conservation successes would be possible."



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

Comings & Goings: Thank You, Kelly Johnson and Stuart Strahl!

Behind the scenes of Vital Ground's work for wildlife is the rock-solid foundation of its Board of Trustees. These dedicated volunteers bring vast experience, thoughtful guidance and crucial support to the conservation efforts you support. As the year ends, several changes to the board provide the opportunity to share heartfelt gratitude.

Since 2019, Kelly Johnson has served as Board Chair with unwavering passion and positivity. From sifting through the details in countless committee meetings to delivering inspiring calls to action at Vital Ground events, Kelly's leadership has motivated our entire conservation community to bring all we have to delivering the organization's mission. Having served on the board in many roles since 2002, Kelly has played no small part in the organization surpassing 1 million acres of total conservation impact. We will miss her tireless optimism but know she won't be far away.

Board Chair Kelly Johnson and Executive Director Ryan Lutey at a Vital Ground project site visit.

Stepping into the Chair role is Ken Hick, a deeply experienced and skillful leader of nonprofits and a committed wildlife conservationist. Since joining the Vital Ground board in the spring of 2024, Ken and his wife Cheri Cooley-Hick have made an outsized impact on the organization's efforts, from hosting community-building events at their home in Oregon to spearheading several portions of Vital Ground's 35th Anniversary fundraising. We are excited for Ken's steady hand to guide the board's next chapter!

Trustees Cheri Cooley-Hick and Ken Hick

Joining Kelly on hiatus from the board next year will be longtime trustees Russ Fox and Andrea Nasi as well as co-founder and trustee Lynne Seus. All four will stay engaged in advisory roles and we look eagerly forward to their returns to the board after a well-deserved break.

Finally, we bid a fond and grateful farewell to an exceptional leader in wildlife conservation, Stuart Strahl, who steps away from the board to prioritize time with family. An experienced international research biologist, former zoo president and career conservationist, Stuart has spent 20 years as a Vital Ground trustee, a tenure that has seen the organization grow from a four-person staff freshly arrived in Montana to the thriving land trust you know today. Stuart's leadership included a highly-impactful tenure as board chair in the 2010s, as he oversaw a transition in executive directors and led a robust round of strategic planning that culminated in the launch of our ongoing One Landscape Initiative, the science-driven conservation strategy that guides our work to protect habitat and prevent conflicts in the most crucial locations connecting the Northern Rockies' wild strongholds.

Trustee and former board chair Stuart Strahl poses with a plaque thanking Vital Ground for funding an electric fence around the municipal transfer station for the city of Troy, Mont.

From all of us on the Vital Ground team, deep thanks to Kelly and Stuart for their tremendous service to wildlife conservation and leaderhsip of our board and community. Bear hugs all around!

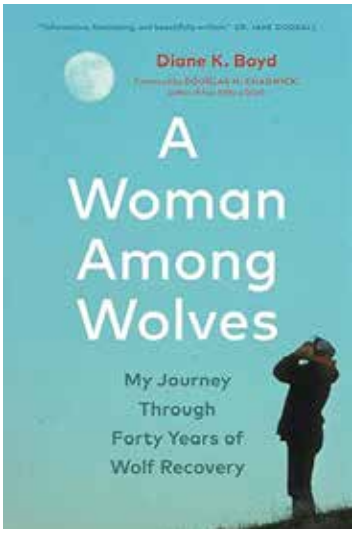
Join Vital Ground and Biologist Diane Boyd for a Book Webinar

As Vital Ground continues celebrating our 35th Anniversary and building momentum for the conservation work ahead, we are thrilled to offer our far-flung community of wildlife supporters a chance to gather virtually this fall and listen to the wisdom of a distinguished voice in the wildlife conservation world.

On **December 10 at 6pm MST** we'll usher in the Winter Solstice and holiday travel season by welcoming esteemed biologist and author Diane Boyd to discuss her new book, *A Woman Among Wolves: My Journey Through Forty Years of Wolf Recovery*.

Here's how publisher Greystone Books describes Diane's work:

Called the Jane Goodall of wolves, world-renowned wildlife biologist Diane Boyd has spent four decades studying and advocating for wolves in the wilds of Montana near Glacier National Park. When she started in the 1970s, she was the only female biologist in the United States researching and radio-collaring wild wolves. With her two dogs for company, she faced the rigors of the Montana winter in an isolated cabin without running water or electricity.



Boyd fearlessly forded icy rivers, strapped on skis to navigate thick stands of lodgepole pine, and monitored packs from the air in a tiny bush plane that skimmed the treetops so she could count wolves and see what they were feeding on. She faced down grizzly bears, mountain lions, wolverines—and the occasional trapper—as she stalked her quarry: a handful of wolves that were making their way south from Canada into Montana. Resilient and resourceful, she devised her own trapping methods and negotiated with locals as wolf populations grew from the first natural colonizer to more than 3,000 wolves in the West today.

In this captivating book, Boyd takes the reader on a wild ride from the early days of wolf research to the present-day challenges of wolf management across the globe, highlighting her interactions with an apex predator that captured her heart and her undying admiration. Her writing resonates with her indomitable spirit as she explores the intricate balance of human and wolf coexistence.

We can't wait for this spirited evening of conversation and community. You can find a link to join the webinar by clicking on the event page at ***vitalground.org/news***. And if you haven't read it already or need a good holiday gift idea, you can order a copy of *A Woman Among Wolves* today from our Bear Mart (*vitalground.org/shop*) and support grizzly conservation in the process!

UDAP
BEARSPRAY.COM

Anniversary Matching Challenge

Support habitat protection with double impact and help end the 35th Anniversary strong! Up to $100,000 in gifts will be matched. Scan the QR code to give now!

THREATENED WATERS

HOW NATIVE FISH AND GRIZZLIES ARE LINKED BY RISK

By Kayla Heinze

Rivers change fast. They flow quick and strong during spring runoff, the riparian corridors along them that wildlife depend on growing lush and green. During a dry summer like this year's, water levels drop greatly and vegetation turns brown. But some things about this special place change much slower. One, in fact, hadn't changed much at all for 66 to 100 million years, until recently.

White sturgeon, this continent's largest freshwater fish, remained basically the same from the Late Cretaceous until the last century, patrolling the bottoms of rivers, feeding on crayfish, worms and fish eggs. For a fish that can live to nearly 100 years, the combined recent impacts of overfishing, warming water temperatures and dams have proved devastating enough to warrant an endangered species listing for the Kootenai River population that is landlocked and isolated between two dams.

The white sturgeon's critical habitat in the Kootenai lies within and alongside two grizzly bear recovery areas. In this corridor, Vital Ground is actively protecting and restoring habitat, including projects along the Kootenai that are specifically designed to benefit sturgeon through improving shoreline habitat. The story of sturgeon and our role in their conservation is just one example of the umbrella species effect, the broad ecological benefits that come from having grizzlies on the landscape and protecting the habitat they need to thrive.

A recent volunteer project for Vital Ground compiled habitat data on three native fish species—Kootenai white sturgeon, bull trout (pictured above) and redband trout—and found significant overlaps between their key habitat and the areas that our conservation strategy has identified as important for grizzly bear conservation.

PROTECTING AND RESTORING FISH HABITAT

The Kootenai Tribe of Idaho, with whom we are partnering on a restoration project along the river's shoreline, has a long-standing relationship with white sturgeon as an important source of food and cultural connection. Native fish species have fed people in the Northern Rockies from time immemorial to the present. Today, fish sustain diverse groups ranging from Indigenous anglers and passionate local recreationists to rural

communities and the economically-invigorating outdoor tourism industry.

Equally as foundational to our collective well-being is the clean water that native fish presence indicates. Where they thrive, we can be assured our rivers are healthful. Perhaps the most iconic exemplar of this fact are bull trout. The embryos of these predatory fish are highly sensitive to sediments and pollutants in the water, and throughout their life cycle they need cold temperatures and complex structures like logs and side channels to thrive.

The Montana State Field Guide states that, "Bull Trout may be considered the Grizzly Bear of the fish world in relationship to its need for unaltered habitat." In fact, bull trout distribution in the Flathead and Clark Fork watersheds overlaps with many crucial riparian corridors for bears. In the Cabinet-Yaak and Northern Continental Divide ecosystems—both designated recovery areas for grizzlies—bull trout stand to benefit from Vital Ground projects that protect stream-side acres from development. Our forest stewardship work in the Swan Valley and beyond shades waterways and prevents runoff. This helps the river remain cool and clear for these fish that are specialized for just those conditions.

RIVER CONNECTIVITY

Another similarity between native fish and their mammalian counterparts is their need for connectivity. Whether between mountain ranges and valleys or rivers and their tributaries, protecting the ability of animals of all kinds to move unobstructed is an essential component of conservation. Redband trout, Montana's only native subspecies of the more widespread rainbow trout, demonstrate the dire consequences when that need is unmet and also the complexity of what connectivity can bring for threatened species on our modern landscapes.

Dams and other barriers, such as areas of concentrated pollution or culverts, have cut redbands off from accessing portions of their historic range. In our region, they now exist in isolated populations, one in the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem, one in the northeastern corner of Washington, and one in the northwestern Bitterroots, with each facing the threat of diminishing genetic diversity just like the small, enduring grizzly populations your support of Vital Ground is helping protect in those same places.

However, with non-native fish species overtaking many of our rivers and creeks, aquatic connectivity can be a risk as much as a help to native fish. Many of our native trout populations, like the remaining redband, are threatened by introduced species through competition for resources and genetic erasure by hybridization. Some of the remaining redband fisheries are losing their genetic integrity and identity as they interbreed with non-native rainbows and other species. Over time, redband could entirely lose unique traits like their distinctive red stripe, creations of thousands of years of partnership with the Northern Rockies' waters.

BROAD BENEFITS OF GRIZZLY CONSERVATION

Hidden below the surface but for their brief rises for food or in an angler's net, it can be far too easy to overlook the well-being of our native fish neighbors. The same is true for many of the other species protected under the grizzly conservation umbrella: native reptiles, insects, amphibians, birds and elusive mammals. As beings who all rely on the same shared resources and habitats, whether we move through them by sky, water or land, what's good for one is often good for many, including us.

By tracking how our grizzly priority areas align with those of other species, like the native fish with which bears have shared the landscape for countless generations, we can better target our projects to create broad benefits. Our projects take a holistic approach to account for the entire ecosystem, including the precious waters that sustain the lives of bears, fish, people and so much more.

Rivers may change quickly—cutting new channels each year, rising and falling with the seasons—and the species that call them home will continue to evolve and adapt to change, too. What we work for at Vital Ground, and what you enable as a supporter of our mission, is the promise of wildlife's continued presence on our shared landscapes and in our waterways. Our commitment to protecting everything from sturgeon and trout to bears and birds will remain a constant force, no matter what else changes.

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

The Vital Ground Foundation's mission *is to protect and restore North America's grizzly bear populations for future generations by conserving wildlife habitat, and by supporting programs that reduce conflicts between bears and humans.*

In support of this mission, we:

- Protect habitat that grizzlies need to survive, 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.

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

©The Vital Ground Foundation

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

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

(406) 549-8650 (Office)
info@vitalground.org
www.vitalground.org
Read more via the QR code below

ACCREDITED
LAND TRUST ACCREDITATION COMMISSION

VITAL GROUND
FOUNDATION

FOUNDERS
Doug and Lynne Seus
Bart the Bear™

BOARD OF TRUSTEES
Ken Hick, Chair
Matt Dusek, Vice Chair
Tim Polich, Treasurer
Theresa Young, Secretary
Meggen Arthur-Wilson
Sou Barrett
Dale Becker
Scott Birmingham
Douglas H. Chadwick
Cheri Cooley-Hick
Danielle Feidler
Thomas H. Fey
John Hechtel
Jo Lowe
Maureen Mayer

TRUSTEE EMERITUS
Doug Seus

STAFF
Emma Davidson
Membership & Donor Services Coordinator
Kim Davitt
Development Director
Mitch Doherty
Conservation Director
Shannon Drye
Administration & Finance Director
Matt Hart
Communications Director
Monica Hull
Corporate Giving & Outreach Coordinator
Brittani Johnson
Conservation Stewardship Manager
Chelsea Klocke
Administrative & Finance Assistant
Ryan Lutey, J.D.
Executive Director
Natalie Moses
Conservation Project Manager
Tanner Williams
Conservation Project Manager

NEWSLETTER
Matt Hart
Editor
Kayla Heinze
Staff Writer

ADVISORY COUNCIL
Wally Becky
Gael Bissell
Russ Fox
Keith Johnson
Kelly Johnson
Colleen Matt
Nancy McLaughlin, J.D.
Andrea Nasi
Michael Proctor, Ph.D.
Banu Qureshi
Melanie Seus
Lynne Seus

AMBASSADORS
Honey Bump the Bear™
Tank the Bear™

Vital News is published twice annually. © 2025 by Vital Ground.
All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part
without written permission is prohibited.