THE VITAL GROUND FOUNDATION | SPRING 2026

VITAL NEWS

CONNECTING LANDSCAPES • PROTECTING WILDLIFE

GROUNDBREAKING STEPS FOR GRIZZLIES AND CONSERVATION

Spring is the season of new beginnings. Across the Northern Rockies, grizzly bear lives began this spring as newborn cubs emerged from their natal dens and took their first steps on an ever-changing landscape. Unbeknownst to them, two of those cubs carry unique significance for their species' recovery in the Lower 48. They are the offspring of Grizzly 1126F, whom wildlife managers translocated from Northwest Montana to Wyoming in an effort to bring new genetic diversity to the Greater Yellowstone grizzly population. Now, those groundbreaking new genes are walking in the world as fuzzy, fast-growing cubs. *(Read more on p. 9)*

Vital Ground celebrated our own milestone over the winter, as the Teton River Project protected nearly 4,500 acres of rich Montana habitat, marking our largest conservation easement ever *(p. 4)*. As bears and other wildlife adapt to changes around them—like the fallout of a historically warm, low-snow winter *(p. 14)*—your impact as a conservation supporter is lasting, advancing Vital Ground's habitat protection and conflict prevention work season after season. Thank you!

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Cover photo: Warm Springs Project

VITAL GROUND FOUNDATION

New Faces, New Spaces, and the Same Commitment to Conservation

If you feel like change is coming faster and faster these days, you're not alone. With two teenage boys at home, it's a nonstop and often futile effort to keep up with the latest technologies and trends competing for their attention, and ours.

As you'll read more about in this newsletter, Vital Ground is changing with the times, too. In recent months, we've added new staff (see p. 13), completed our largest conservation easement to date (p. 5) and expanded to a bigger office space a few buildings down from our last one. *(Please note our new address: 27 Fort Missoula Rd. Suite 2, Missoula, MT 59804.)*

These changes are not just flashy fads, however. In the months and years ahead, they will allow Vital Ground to meet the growing need for our conservation mission. This spring's news of two cubs bringing welcome genetic diversity to the Greater Yellowstone grizzly population (p. 9) only punctuates the urgent need for Vital Ground's work. The long-term success of grizzly recovery in the Lower 48 will be measured by genetic connectivity achieved through the natural movement of bears between ecosystems. To get there, habitat protection and conflict prevention will be needed across more and more landscapes from Wyoming to Washington.

Successful grizzly bear recovery in the Lower 48 depends on natural connectivity between ecosystems, meaning Vital Ground's work remains urgently needed.

Our conservation vision is a bold one, to be sure, but it's in the nature of land protection to offer a steadying force for the future, an assurance that key acres will stay open from development so that grizzlies and other wide-ranging wildlife have room to move safely across landscapes and adapt to the myriad environmental changes they face.

That durable nature of Vital Ground's work is not changing at all—only our capacity to provide it is. Between last fall's newsletter and this one, you can read about the four projects completed in late 2025 plus several more nearing the finish line this spring. Each one conserves land in a key location identified by our conservation strategy, so you can be sure that as the quantity of our work increases, it will remain laser-focused on the most important places for grizzlies.

We can only chart this exciting course for the organization because of supporters like you. From the jaw-dropping generosity so many of you displayed during last year's 35th Anniversary campaign to the hundreds of you who answered the call to meet project funding gaps in this year's Valentine's and Earth Day crowdfunds, your contributions both inspire and enable us to move forward with greater capacity and efficacy than ever before.

Even as things seem to be changing so fast, your support of wildlife conservation remains the rock-solid foundation of Vital Ground. We are proud to turn it into lasting positive outcomes across the landscapes of grizzly country.

With warmth and gratitude,

Ryan Lutey, Executive Director

KEEPING KEY ACRES OPEN

THANKS TO YOUR SUPPORT, THE WARM SPRINGS AND RIVER BIRCH PROJECTS ARE NEARLY COMPLETE

Grizzly bears are on the move come spring, searching for mates or safe spaces to raise cubs. Thanks to supporters like you, their movements through two key areas in Montana will remain undisturbed by subdivision and development as two more habitat protection efforts near the finish line. Inspiring donations to our Valentine's Day and Earth Day crowdfunding campaigns have fully funded both the Warm Springs and River Birch projects. Once final transactional steps are completed in the months ahead, these vital acres will be permanently protected!

On forested slopes above Garrison, Mont., the **Warm Springs Project** (cover photo, blue dot on map) sits in a key area helping link the Northern Continental Divide, Selway-Bitterroot and Greater Yellowstone ecosystems. As grizzly bears continue to return to more of their historic range in Montana, protecting habitat along connectivity paths like Warm Springs Creek allows them to move safely between wild strongholds.

The 800-acre project site includes mixed conifer forests and lush wetlands that come together to create exceptional habitat for bears and other sensitive wildlife. This project protects the headwaters of Warm Springs Creek, where elk gather throughout the summer, a rare, genetically-pure strain of westslope cutthroat trout endures, and grizzlies disperse out of the Blackfoot Valley up and over these ridges to occupy new habitat to the south in the High Divide region that connects three federal grizzly

recovery zones. It's rich habitat worth protecting!

Bears are also on the move farther north on the edge of the NCDE, following the Teton River out of the Rocky Mountain Front Range onto their historic prairie habitat. The **River Birch Project** (above photo, yellow dot on map) builds on previous conservation successes in this key area for habitat protection. Wetlands, cottonwood groves and a lush riparian area make this property an essential link in a larger network of conserved acres that allow wildlife to navigate the Front's mix of wild and working lands more safely. It's adjacent to Vital Ground's Glen Willow conservation easement and just upstream from the Teton River Project, our largest easement ever, completed late last year (see next page). Now, because of your support, both River Birch and Warm Springs are fully funded and nearing permanent protection. Thank you!

HOLDING ONTO THE PLACE

THE FELLOWS FAMILY, NRCS AND VITAL GROUND PROTECT KEY HABITAT AND WORKING LANDS

The Teton River Project is Vital Ground's largest conservation easement to date, protecting a family ranch and miles of rich habitat along two waterways. (Photo: Eric Ian)

By Matt Hart

Collaboration on behalf of wildlife and people alike involving a hard-working family, a federal agency and a nonprofit—it might sound like a pipe dream in today's world but it's exactly what happened, slowly but surely, along an enchanting stretch of the Teton River east of Montana's Rocky Mountain Front Range.

After years of diligent partnership, nearly 4,500 acres of agricultural land and rich wildlife habitat will be protected from subdivision and new development as Vital Ground, the Fellows Family and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) completed a conservation easement for the Fellows Ranch near Choteau, Mont., in late December.

The ranch includes more than five miles of frontage along the Teton River as well as two miles along a tributary, Spring Creek. Lined with cottonwoods, these lush bottomlands provide important range for numerous wildlife species, including grizzly bears that follow waterways to move between mountain habitat in the nearby Bob Marshall Wilderness and the lower-elevation grasslands of the Rocky Mountain Front. Through years

of careful management, the ranch has avoided conflicts between bears and livestock, but has long faced pressure to subdivide and sell portions of the acreage for residential and commercial development.

"We've been here fifty years and the place is the way it is because of my folks," said Mark Fellows. "One of the last things my dad said to me was, 'Hold onto the place as long as you can.' This is one way we can maintain it in perpetuity."

RANCHING AND GRIZZLY RANGE

Until the 20th century, grizzly bears roamed the Great Plains of western North America along with its mountains and coastlines. Now, grizzlies are gradually reclaiming parts of their historic range on the prairies of central Montana, but they must navigate a patchwork of waterways and working lands in the process. When paired with conflict prevention efforts like electric fencing and securing attractants, protecting the region's farms and ranchlands from subdivision and new development lays the groundwork for future coexistence with grizzlies and

improved social tolerance for the species.

"Land conservation is the most important thing for long-term grizzly bear conservation across North America," said Mike Madel, a retired state bear biologist and Choteau-area landowner. "The fact that you have these large cow-calf operations only encourages wildlife conservation over a long-term basis, not only for elk and deer but also for large carnivores. Ultimately, the habitat has to be there."

Two grizzlies follow a riparian habitat corridor along the edge of the Fellows Ranch. Through careful monitoring of bear activity and adjustment of ranching practices, the family has minimized conflicts as grizzly activity has increased. (Photo: Mitch Doherty)

The Fellows Ranch offers a prime example of how working lands and wildlife habitat can overlap. While closely monitoring any bear activity, the family conducts the bulk of its ranching operations on the higher grassland portions of the property, keeping a buffer of cultivated land between livestock pasture and the riparian corridors. As grizzly activity has slowly increased in recent years, they have transitioned their calving operations to occur during the months when bears are rarely present on the property.

"We really like to coexist with a lot of things around here," said Fellows. "The grizzlies around here are shy about things, but they're around. Wildlife habitat in general in the world is shrinking. We recognize that, and the idea that we can't get along is foreign to us."

MAINTAINING AGRICULTURE AND OPEN SPACE

Under the easement, the Fellows will continue their ranching operation while keeping any further development on the 4,482-acre property to the small portion of the ranch containing the family's residence and agricultural buildings. Meanwhile, a wide diversity of species beyond bears will benefit from the conservation of the two riparian corridors, including bald eagles, waterfowl and many migratory birds that frequent the nearby Freezeout Lake National Wildlife Refuge. The agreement also maintains the property's rich floodplain soils and irrigated hay lands, protecting the region's rural and scenic character against the backdrop of widespread development pressures.

"There's a long history of voluntary private land conservation efforts on Montana's Rocky Mountain Front by landowners like the Fellows," said Mitch Doherty, Conservation Director for Vital Ground. "It's inspiring to work with these families who recognize that working lands and ranches are good habitat, and that protecting those lands benefits not only wildlife but all of us who appreciate Montana's open spaces."

The conservation agreement marks the largest in Vital Ground's history, and would not be possible without the NRCS partnership through the Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) program that draws funds from the Farm Bill. Additional project support came from the Heart of the Rockies Initiative Keep It Connected program, The William C. Bullitt Foundation, Atira Conservation and many individual supporters. Thank you for making this landmark win for wildlife and people possible!

Electric fencing can make the difference between conflict and coexistence where grizzly range and working landscapes overlap. (Photo courtesy of Swan Valley Connections)

GOOD FENCES, GOOD NEIGHBORS

HOW A VITAL GROUND PARTNER HELPED A RANCH AND A YOUNG GRIZZLY STAY OUT OF TROUBLE

By Sidney Scarlett

When spring in western Montana arrives, another seasonal shift happens across the region's mountains and valleys. Grizzly bears start to emerge from their winter dens, hungry and ready to roam. For those of us who live in bear country, this annual wake-up call comes with an important reminder: the steps we take around our homes and ranches can make a real difference in keeping both people and bears safe.

Across the Northern Rockies, landowners, communities and conservation partners are working together to prevent conflicts before they start. Backed by supporters like you, Vital Ground is proud to support these efforts. Our habitat protection projects help conserve landscapes that allow grizzly bears and other wildlife to move safely between ecosystems, but as grizzly populations recover in the Lower 48 and bears continue expanding into areas where people live, work, and recreate, practical coexistence

tools are just as important as conserving the land itself.

Through our Conservation Partners Grant Program, Vital Ground helps fund on-the-ground projects that reduce conflicts and keep bears from developing dangerous habits. In the Seeley-Swan region of Montana, we support coexistence efforts led by groups like the Blackfoot Challenge and Swan Valley Connections. These organizations work directly with landowners to secure attractants through bear-resistant garbage can dispersal and installing tools like electric fencing.

FENCING SUCCESS: A BEAR CALLED PORTMAN

At first glance, an electric fence may not seem like much. A few strands of wire and a small charger hardly look like a barrier for an animal as powerful as a grizzly bear. However, when installed properly, these fences

deliver a quick, memorable shock that teaches bears an important lesson: the potential food inside isn't worth the effort. That lesson benefits everyone. Landowners can protect livestock, gardens, beehives, and other attractants without harming wildlife, while bears learn to continue searching for natural foods in the surrounding forests and mountains. A recent project near Seeley Lake—and the young female grizzly it kept out of trouble—shows just how effective this approach can be.

During the 2025 field season, the Blackfoot Challenge, a conservation cooperative based in Ovando, Mont., completed a priority electric fencing project at a ranch near Seeley Lake with financial support from Vital Ground. The fence now secures the ranch compound and surrounding calving lots—areas that have long attracted grizzly bears moving through the region. Hungry bears naturally investigate places where livestock, grain or other high-calorie foods might be available, and over time those visits can turn into recurring conflicts. This property was a priority for electric fence installation because it has already been a catalyst for conflict.

In past years, grizzly activity around the calving areas resulted in two bears being relocated and another euthanized. Last year brought renewed concern when a female grizzly of reproductive age—nicknamed Portman—began returning to the ranch. Each visit increased the risk that she might gain access to livestock and eventually have to be removed.

The new electric fence changed that outcome.

Portman continued traveling through the area, but she could no longer reach the calving lot or other attractants on the property. The fence held. There were no breaches, livestock losses, and no reason for wildlife managers to intervene. Instead of becoming another conflict case, Portman remains a wild bear moving through the landscape as she naturally would.

For a reproductive female grizzly, that outcome matters beyond her own survival because these bears are vital to species recovery. Keeping bears out of trouble helps ensure they can continue contributing to the slow but steady recovery of the Northern Rockies population. For the ranch, it means peace of mind during calving season and one less source of stress for people working the land.

Projects like this show how proactive conflict prevention can benefit both wildlife and local communities. The encouraging truth is that most bear conflicts are preventable. Bears are not seeking trouble—they are simply following their noses. When attractants are secured and clear boundaries are in place, bears usually move on and continue traveling through the forests, wetlands and mountain valleys that make this region some of the highest-quality wildlife habitat in the Lower 48.

CONFLICT PREVENTION SUPPORTS CONNECTIVITY

The Seeley-Swan region sits within one of the most important wildlife corridors in the Northern Rockies. Grizzly bears moving between the Mission Mountains, the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex and surrounding landscapes often pass through this valley, drawn by a rich mix of forests, wetlands, berry patches and river bottoms that provide food throughout much of the year. The broad valley floor and surrounding mountains also offer something equally important: connected habitat that allows bears to travel long distances across the landscape.

That movement is critical to the long-term recovery of grizzlies. As bears expand beyond the strongholds where populations have rebounded, they need safe pathways that allow them to disperse, find mates and establish new home ranges. The Seeley-Swan serves as one of those pathways, linking large wild ecosystems and helping maintain the genetic diversity that keeps populations of both grizzlies and other native species healthy.

For the people who call this valley home, that connectivity is something to take pride in. It is a sign that this landscape still functions much as it has for centuries. But it also means that this legacy depends on the everyday choices made by those who live and work here.

The return of bears to the landscape each spring provides an opportunity for all of us in grizzly country to think about the steps we can take to reduce conflicts before they start. Sometimes it comes down to a few strands of wire, a charger and a willingness to try something new. Good fences really do make good neighbors. And in bear country, they help ensure there is room for all of us.

Ruby Creek Project Protects North Idaho Habitat Buffer

By Matt Hart

The Lower 48's two smallest grizzly bear populations got a boost in their slow road to recovery at the tail end of 2025, as Vital Ground protected another key piece of habitat in the North Idaho landscape that connects them.

Just south of the town of Bonners Ferry, the 200-acre acquisition along Ruby Creek will maintain a key habitat buffer on the eastern edge of the Selkirk Mountains. Bordering public lands, the protected property will keep open a movement channel for wildlife traveling to lower elevations and potentially ranging between the Selkirks and the Cabinet Mountains to the east.

The Ruby Creek Project conserves 200 forested acres on the edge of North Idaho's Selkirk Mountains.

"The lower elevations are bottlenecks for key species like grizzly bear, and the number one threat is the permanent loss of those habitats," said Greg Johnson, a retired Idaho Fish and Game biologist who worked on grizzly recovery in the area for decades and lives near the project site. "There's constant pressure to divide and develop land. Where Vital Ground has their most important role is to put together projects in those really key critical areas."

Containing mature stands of Douglas fir, western larch and other conifers, the project site includes rich riparian habitat along Ruby Creek with frequent use by moose, elk and deer as well as benchlands that provide spring forage for grizzlies descending from winter dens to lower elevations.

With the latest surveys from the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee estimating just 50-100 grizzlies in the American portion of the Selkirks and a similar number in the neighboring Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem, preventing subdivision and development in known seasonal habitat like Ruby Creek will directly aid the slow growth and genetic reconnection of these grizzly populations.

The project kicks off Vital Ground's Idaho Panhandle Initiative (IPI), which aims to protect four more key habitat sites between the Selkirk and Cabinet-Yaak ecosystems, totaling more than 2,500 acres of conservation opportunities. Through a mix of land purchases and conservation agreements with landowners, the initiative will significantly benefit wildlife movement while maintaining open, scenic landscapes against the backdrop of region-wide development pressures.

"The Idaho Panhandle Initiative is our most ambitious effort yet to make sure northern Idaho continues to support both wildlife movement and the rural, scenic character that its residents cherish," said Vital Ground Conservation Director Mitch Doherty. "These projects each carry unique habitat values that support not just regional grizzly recovery but entire webs of animal and plant life. We've been working with landowners on several of these conservation opportunities for decades and are excited that supporters and partners are enabling us to act quickly now that these projects are moving forward."

With the Ruby Creek property now protected thanks to your support, Vital Ground will steward the acres to maintain their many benefits for wildlife while exploring partnership opportunities to further restore and enhance the site's conservation values. Thank you!

Two Small Cubs, One Big Milestone for Grizzly Recovery

By Sidney Scarlett

This spring brought an exciting sign of progress for grizzly recovery in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

A female grizzly originally translocated from Montana's Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE) was photographed in April outside her den with two cubs beside her. The bear, documented as Grizzly 1126F by biologists, was moved as part of a collaborative effort between Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, the Wyoming Game & Fish Department and Yellowstone National Park to build genetic diversity between the Lower 48's two largest grizzly populations.

The sight of those cubs is more than heartwarming. It is the first clear evidence that this interagency partnership is meeting its goal: to bring new grizzly genetics into the isolated Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) population.

Montana FWP director Christy Clark called the moment "concrete evidence" of successful genetic enhancement of the Yellowstone population and a milestone for grizzly bear management in the Lower 48. It also highlights something conservationists have long known: connected landscapes are essential to healthy wildlife populations.

Today, genetic exchange between the two grizzly populations still depends on extraordinary and expensive human coordination. But the larger conservation vision is a future where bears no longer need to be moved by truck because secure habitat and social tolerance allow them to move naturally between the Northern Rockies' wild strongholds.

That vision is central to Vital Ground's work. Between the NCDE and GYE lies a mosaic of valleys, forested slopes, working ranchlands and developed areas that could one day include natural pathways for dispersing bears. Protecting these landscapes now helps create the conditions for future generations of grizzlies to roam, reconnect and strengthen the resilience of both populations.

This photo taken during a biological surveillance flight showed two cubs alongside Grizzly 1126F, who was translocated from Montana to Wyoming. (Photo courtesy of Wyoming Game & Fish)

The arrival of these cubs is a hopeful reminder of what's possible when science, collaboration, and habitat conservation work together. It also adds a new layer to the ongoing debate over the grizzly's status as a federally-protected species. Genetic isolation was one reason that a federal court blocked the 2018 decision to remove GYE grizzlies from protection under the Endangered Species Act, but in that ruling and subsequent challenges, courts have indicated that many other factors—such as a lack of research on the impact logging roads have on grizzly habitat—could justify continued federal protection.

For now, we celebrate the emergence of these two special cubs and the health of their mother while continuing Vital Ground's mission of habitat protection and conflict prevention, work that will remain crucial regardless of the grizzly's listing status. And with every acre protected in a key linkage zone, we move closer to a future where genetic exchange happens for grizzlies as it did for thousands of years across North America.

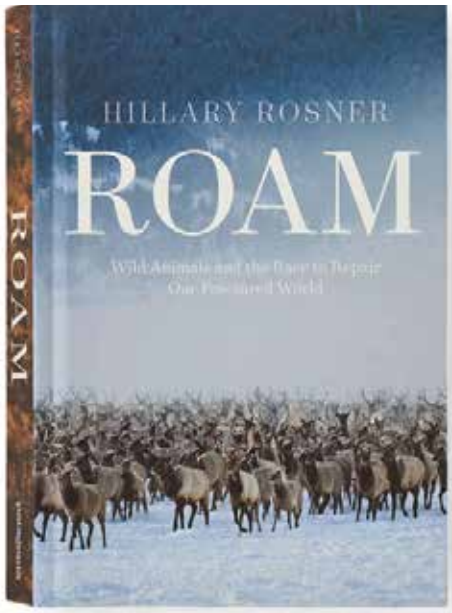
Support from our conservation community helps make that future possible. Your generosity helps protect the wild corridors that connect ecosystems, reduce conflict, and keep bears moving safely across the Northern Rockies. Together, we can help ensure moments like this become not just rare milestones, but part of a thriving, naturally connected future for grizzlies.

Roam: Join an Evening with Author Hilary Rosner May 27

Across the world, animals are on the move come springtime. Join Vital Ground and some special guests in person or online for a timely and inspiring evening with award-winning science journalist Hillary Rosner as she presents her powerful new book, *Roam: Wild Animals and the Race to Repair Our Fractured World*, on Wednesday, May 27 at Shakespeare & Co. Bookstore in Missoula. The discussion will also be available as a virtual livestream on Vital Ground's YouTube channel.

This special event will feature a lively conversation between Rosner and environmental philosopher and University of Montana professor Christopher J. Preston, followed by an audience Q&A and discussion with a panel of local conservation experts, including author and Vital Ground trustee Doug Chadwick. Presented in partnership with the Center for Large Landscape Conservation, the evening will explore how global ideas on wildlife connectivity are playing out in Montana.

At the heart of the conversation is Rosner's new book. Published by Patagonia Books, *Roam* elegantly addresses one of our most urgent conservation challenges: habitat fragmentation. As roads, fences, and development divide once-connected landscapes, wild animals increasingly struggle to move freely—a challenge made even more urgent by climate change. In *Roam*, Rosner brings this issue to life through vivid

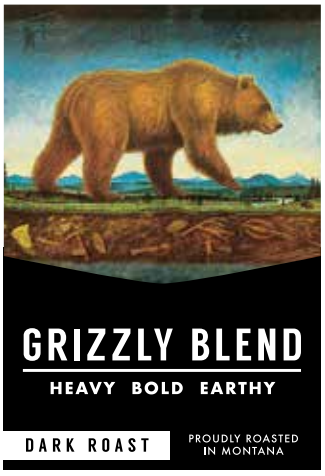


storytelling and on-the-ground reporting, highlighting people and projects from the Rockies to the tropical rainforest, all of them working to reconnect ecosystems and restore wildlife movement.

But this event will go beyond the page. From wildlife crossings to landscape-scale collaboration, the discussion and panel with local experts will offer both urgency and optimism—showing how reconnecting habitat can benefit not only wildlife, but entire ecosystems and human communities as well.

Admission is free and open to the public. Copies of *Roam* will be available for purchase, with ordering also available online through Patagonia Books.

Tune in to the event livestream and watch more videos at ***youtube.com/ForTheGrizzly***



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Grizzly Blend logo art by Monte Dolack

Miles for the Wild: Get Ready for our July Hike-a-thon

By Monica Hull, Corporate Giving and Outreach Coordinator

Vital Ground's community of wildlife supporters is lacing up their boots and hopping on their bikes once again for our second annual Miles for the Wild Hike-a-thon. Last year's 35th Anniversary event was such a success that we're making this an annual tradition!

Miles for the Wild is an opportunity for everyone who loves the outdoors to support the wild places grizzly bears and other animals need to survive. Whether you're hiking, running, biking or paddling, Miles for the Wild is a fun way to connect with fellow wildlife supporters from around the country (and beyond!) while helping raise funds for Vital Ground's habitat protection and conflict prevention efforts.

Here's how it works:

- Register as an individual or as part of a team for free at ***give.vitalground.org/MilesForTheWild***
- Pledge to hike, run, bike or paddle 35 miles individually, or collectively as a team, throughout the month of July
- Personalize your fundraising page and collect donations in support of your miles
- Put in the miles between July 1 and July 31!
- Track your miles personally or using our Miles for the Wild Tracker form (we'll send it to you when you register)

A crew of Vital Ground staff and supporters hiked in Northwest Montana's Jewel Basin during last year's July Hike-a-thon, which we're excited to bring back this summer for round two!

- Win prizes for your fundraising and mileage achievements
- Share your trail stories and photos and connect with other wildlife supporters through Vital Ground's Instagram and Facebook channels

Sound like a good time? However you like to move and wherever you call home, we hope you'll join our conservation community this July in getting outside with a purpose: hiking, running, biking or paddling in support of grizzly bears and all things wild.

Interested in sponsoring Miles for the Wild and having your business showcased throughout the event? Reach out to me at ***mhull@vitalground.org***. Thank you!

New Staff: Welcome, Kerry Gallagher and Sidney Scarlett!

As Vital Ground continues to meet the urgent need for habitat conservation and conflict prevention in the Northern Rockies by accelerating the pace of our work, the staff that keeps that work moving forward is also growing! Since last fall, we've added two new faces to the team.

As we wrapped up a busy 2025, we welcomed **Kerry Gallagher** to the Vital Ground staff as our new Administrative Assistant. If you've called or stopped by the office since November, you've probably had the chance to meet her! Kerry brings her passion for the natural environment and a professional background in the legal sector to Vital Ground's conservation efforts. In addition to greeting visitors and supporters in person and over the phone, her role includes crucial management of many operational systems that underlie Vital Ground's fundraising and donor relations and the habitat protection they enable.

"As a lover of wildlife and wild places, I have been following Vital Ground's conservation efforts over the years," said Kerry. "I am ecstatic that I now get to be part of their amazing team."

Kerry grew up in Missoula surrounded by rivers and mountains that provided an endless supply of backcountry adventures. She was later fortunate to share many of those wild places with her daughter, imparting in them both a fierce determination to conserve both public and private lands for future generations of all types of critters.

Kerry Gallagher and her pup hiking in Montana's Great Burn Recommended Wilderness Area.

In her free time, Kerry can likely be found on foot, ski or bike along one of her favorite hiking trails in the Rattlesnake Mountains. Other pastimes include reading, obsessing over maps in search of new backpacking routes and birdwatching with an emphasis on owl spotting. She is accompanied on most adventures by her blue heeler pup, a professional trail-scout and unskilled chaser of squirrels. Kerry's love of wild places, wild animals and freedom of movement for humans and wildlife alike makes her a perfect fit with the Vital Ground team and mission. Welcome, Kerry!

Loyal readers of *Vital News* and followers of our digital communication channels have likely noticed a turnover in personnel on those fronts, too. While we were sad to say farewell to Kayla Heinze, who is off to

graduate school this year, Vital Ground was thrilled to add **Sidney Scarlett** to our staff in January as our new Communications and Marketing Coordinator.

Sidney brings a passion for conservation and a background in multimedia storytelling to the organization's digital marketing, social media and other outreach efforts. Sidney grew up in Seattle but found her way into the Cascades and broader Mountain West as a teenager—and quickly knew it was where she wanted to stay. She began her career in conservation and outdoor recreation on trail and conservation corps crews. More recently, her work in sustainability, recreation and nonprofit communications has served to enhance her hands-on understanding of land stewardship, access and the importance of preserving open space.

"I'm incredibly excited to start at Vital Ground and to help support conservation work that makes a real, tangible difference for the other creatures we share our landscape with," said Sidney. "Protecting habitat is foundational to healthy wildlife populations, and I feel lucky to contribute to that work through storytelling and outreach."

Sidney is a proud graduate of the University of Montana (Go Griz!), where she earned her Bachelor's in Sustainability Science & Practice. Before joining Vital Ground, she worked locally in several communications

Sidney Scarlett hiking in the foothills above Missoula.

roles in the environmental and outdoor recreation sectors. These experiences helped shape her belief that conserving open, connected landscapes is essential—not just for people seeking adventure, but for wildlife that depend on room to roam. As a hunter and angler, she deeply values Montana's working lands and wild places and the role thoughtful conservation plays in supporting coexistence.

When she's not behind the screens of Vital Ground's communications channels, Sidney enjoys trail running, hunting and fishing, reading, knitting, trying out new recipes and talking conservation with her fiancé, and attempting to identify birds with varying degrees of confidence. Join us in giving Sidney a griz-sized welcome to the Vital Ground team!

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Join Our Wild Bear Adventure!

A few last spots remain to travel with Vital Ground to ***Knight Inlet Lodge*** *in coastal British Columbia this 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 in the coastal Great Bear Rainforest.*
- ***For more info****: Visit vitalground.org/knight-inlet*
- ***To reserve a spot:*** *Contact Kim Davitt, Development Director, at (406) 549-8650 or kdavitt@vitalground.org.*

LOW SNOW IN GRIZZLY COUNTRY

FROM JANUARY BEAR SIGHTINGS TO RECORD WARMTH, WHAT WAS UP WITH THIS WINTER?

By Matt Hart

If you live in the western United States, or know someone who does, you probably got tired of hearing it: *Awfully warm out there... What a weird winter... Felt like April in January.*

Variations on the same refrain echoed around the region as the calendar turned to 2026 and a once-promising early-season snowpack began to shrivel all across the West. When all was said and done, late winter and early spring were plenty wet in the Northern Rockies, but record warmth meant that in many places, only the highest elevations received that precipitation as snowfall.

A late March report from the National Weather Service in Missoula called it "a much warmer than normal, in some cases historically warm, and wetter winter season." The report detailed locations across the region finishing the season with average temperatures 5-10 degrees above their historic norm and snowfall totals well below average.

Sitting just under the Continental Divide, the city of Butte, Mont., recorded its warmest winter since 1895, a full 10 degrees above average. Farther north, in the heart of grizzly country, the town of West Glacier's snowfall for the season was more than 42 inches below average and its temperatures the warmest since recordkeeping began there in 1948.

Tucked into dens in the mountains nearby, could grizzly bears feel the difference?

HOW A WARM WINTER CAN IMPACT GRIZZLIES

Warmer weather affects grizzly bears in many ways, from altering the timing of winter denning to changing the availability of important food sources like huckleberries.

Long before plants were growing, however, this year's dry January brought at least two Yellowstone-area bears—a grizzly in Yellowstone National Park and a black bear near Jackson, Wyo.—out onto the landscape in what

should have been the middle of their denning period.

While it's not unheard of for bears to take a midwinter wander then return to denning, early emergence can easily lead to trouble. Before spring plant foods become available, scavenging winterkill—usually deer, elk or bison carcasses—represents the only natural food source for early-rising bears. But those carcasses are largely the result of animals perishing from exposure during prolonged cold snaps, which were practically nonexistent this winter.

While late winter and early spring moisture should mean early-season plant foods are available to bears, things could get rough as the year continues. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's long-term spring forecast calls for both warmer and drier conditions than normal. Add low reserves of snowpack to the equation and soils will likely dry out fast. By midsummer, the berry growth that bears count on could be hindered.

On a deeper level, early springs and changing food availability can wreak havoc on grizzlies' time-tested seasonal rhythms, their intergenerational knowledge of when and where to find certain berries or nuts or protein-rich moths. And if most of an ecosystem's cycles simply move earlier on the calendar as many climate models suggest, where will that leave bears come peak calorie-loading time in the fall?

What we do know is that when natural food sources dry up, bears living near developed areas will turn to a human-associated diet: garbage, backyard birdfeeders, livestock. And once they become habituated to seeking food near people, it rarely ends well for the bear.

Some Northern Rockies species face a more direct threat from warm winters than grizzlies. Specially adapted to hunt in deep snow where others cannot, Canada lynx lose their natural advantage when snowfall levels drop too low.

HELP BEARS STAY SAFE AND ADAPT

Whether you're out recreating on the landscape or a landowner with attractants that could bring a hungry bear onto your property, anyone who spends time in grizzly country can be a part of helping bears and people alike stay safe as the impacts of strange seasons play out. From carrying bear spray and practicing its use to securing garbage and domestic livestock, there are many proactive steps you can take. Vital Ground's Bear Safety Hub can give you a full rundown of strategies and resources: check it out at ***vitalground.org/bear-safety-hub***.

As a Vital Ground supporter, you also do your part to keep bears safe by advancing our habitat protection and conflict prevention efforts. Our projects to conserve habitat in key corridors allow bears to move safely between wild strongholds, avoiding people and adapting to change, while our local conservation partnerships around the region fund proven coexistence tools like bear-resistant garbage programs, electric fencing for ranchers and much more.

Just how harshly this historically warm winter will impact bears remains to be seen, just as the larger backdrop of the climate crisis carries deep uncertainty and risk for many wildlife species. Some, like the snow-adapted Canada lynx, face a truly existential threat from withering snow levels like we saw this year.

One thing is for sure, however: from bears to lynx to butterflies, protecting habitat and preventing conflicts gives Nature's resilience a chance to endure across the changing seasons ahead.

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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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